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O'Sullivan, T., Dutton, B  
*Media*, Arnold.

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## ▼ 6 REALISM AND DOCUMENTARY

Realism is an important and complex concept in the analysis of media texts. Discussions about realism are usually based around the extent to which the media are able to represent the world as it really is.

### REALISM

Television seems to be describing the world as it is. This is most obvious with news and current affairs programmes. These clearly make a claim to be telling the truth; they are describing the world as it really is. This claim is enhanced by the feeling that television is operating in the present, unlike any other medium. Not only is it describing reality, it is giving us the events as they happen. As Feuer puts it, television has the quality of 'liveness'. Contemporary satellite technology has enhanced these qualities, with often dramatic and bizarre results. For example, during the Gulf War, there were television reports of American bombing of Baghdad which described missiles as they passed the reporter's hotel window.

Realism, however, is not only a characteristic of factual programming. Perhaps more importantly, fictional output can be described in this way. Television drama of all kinds usually tries very hard to give the *feel* of reality. An historical drama, *The Buccaneers* for example, creates a period setting in loving detail and, even if the speech may be modern, a great deal of care goes into trying to persuade the audience that it is actually present in the Victorian period. Similarly, soap operas like *EastEnders* aim to be realistic. Trouble is taken to make the characters and sets authentic so that the illusion is created that these are real people in a real east London setting.

Although this attempt at creating reality may seem to be an obvious feature of television, the concept of realism itself is very difficult to define. Abercrombie et al. (1992) argue that there are three features that distinguish realist texts. First, realism offers a 'window on the world'. In the case of television, there is no mediation between the viewer and what he or she is watching. It is as if the

television set were a sheet of clear glass which offered the viewer an uninterrupted vision of what lay beyond. Television is, or *seems* to be, like direct sight. Second, realism employs a narrative which has rationally ordered connections between events and characters. Realist cultural forms, certainly those involving fictional presentations at any rate, consist of a caused, logical flow of events, often structured into a beginning, a middle and a closed conclusion. Events and characters, therefore, do not have a random or arbitrary nature, but are organized by rational principles. In these respects, realist forms may be contrasted with those texts that are essentially 'spectacular'. The pleasure of texts that involve 'spectacle' lies in the images themselves; it is a visual, not a narrative pleasure. It is important to note that static images can also be narrative. Many photographs and paintings often have a 'before' and 'after' outside the specific moment captured in the frame. They are episodes in a story and imply the rest of the narrative; the meaning of the picture is given by its place in an implied narrative. Non-realist forms do not imply such a narrative. They do not so much tell a story as invite contemplation.

The third aspect of realism is the concealment of the production process. Most television is realist in this sense in that the audience is not made aware, during the programmes themselves, that there is a process of production lying behind the programmes. The illusion of transparency is preserved. It is as if there were no author. The form conspires to convince us that we are not viewing something that has been constructed in a particular fashion by a determinate producer or producers. This concealment of the production process, this hiding of the author's hand, is best seen when the occasional television programme does not follow the convention. When in the 1995 series of *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* the camera moves from filming the set to following one of the characters out of the set and into the studio with its plain brick walls, other cameras, and a maze of cables and other equipment, the audience feels a shock as the illusion of realism is disrupted.

However powerful its effects, realism is only a *convention*. Television may appear to be a window on the world but it is not really *transparent*. What it offers is essentially a *construction* of the world, a version of reality. This is not a conspiracy to mislead the audience. It is simply that there is no way in which any description of reality can be the only, pure and correct one, just as people will give very different descriptions of what they see out of their kitchen window. As soon as television producers start to film, they are necessarily selecting and interpreting; they *must* do so in order to present a coherent programme of whatever kind. As a result, of course, all sorts of thing can be excluded by realist conventions. For example, Jordan (1981) argues that:

*Coronation Street* conventionally excludes everything which cannot be seen to be physically present . . . This means, in effect, that most social explanations,

and all openly political ones, are omitted. The differing situations, the troubles or successes, of the various characters are explained largely in terms of their (innate) psychological make-up, occasionally attributed to luck.

The critical question raised by the convention of realism is then: is there a systematic exclusion of particular features of the world from television? A number of writers argue that there is and the effect on audiences is particularly powerful because the realist convention does *seem* to be a correct description of the world. Television presents one reality and audiences are persuaded to accept it as the only reality. MacCabe (1981a, 1981b) argues for this position. He suggests that a variety of points of view may be articulated in a television text, but one reality is still preferred; there is a dominant point of view, that of the narrator, which is presented as the natural, transparent one. There is therefore a *hierarchy of discourses* or points of view in which one discourse controls the others.

It might be replied, however, that MacCabe's is too simplified a view. Jordan (1981), for example, argues that there is not a single realism in television, but rather a number of realisms. She therefore describes *Coronation Street* as a version of realism which she calls soap opera realism. This is a combination of the social realism of films of the 1960s with the realism of soap opera. The former demands that:

life be presented in the form of a narrative of personal events, each with a beginning, a middle and an end, important to the central characters concerned but affecting others in only minor ways; that though these events are ostensibly about *social* problems they should have as one of their central concerns the settling of people in life; that the resolution of these events should always be in terms of the effect of personal interventions; that characters should be either working-class or of the classes immediately visible to the working classes (shopkeepers, say . . .) and should be credibly accounted for in terms of the 'ordinariness' of their homes, families, friends; that the locale should be urban and provincial (preferably in the industrial north); that the settings should be commonplace and recognisable (the pub, the street, the factory, the home and more particularly the kitchen); that the time should be 'the present'; that the style should be such as to suggest an unmediated, unprejudiced and complete view of reality; to give, in summary, the impression that the reader, or viewer, has some time at the expense of the characters depicted. (p. 28)

The latter, on the other hand, requires that:

though events must carry their own minor conclusions they must not be seen as finally resolving; that there should be an intertwining of plots so deployed as to imply a multiplicity of experience whilst effectively covering only a narrow

range of directly 'personal' events; that these personal events should be largely domestic; that there should be substantial roles for women; that all roles should involve a serious degree of stereotyping; that the most plausible setting, in view of these later requirements, would be the home; and that the long-term passage of fictional time should mirror fairly accurately the actual passage of time. (p. 28)

Although this form of realism does exclude certain features it also does allow alternative realities to emerge. Furthermore, as Jordan notes, the pleasure of a soap opera like *Coronation Street* may partly lie in the perception by the audience that it is a construction. The programme, in other words, breaks with the third feature of the definition of realism put forward at the beginning of this section. It may, indeed, be doing this quite deliberately in a number of ways. For example, some of the characters are caricatures rather than realist depictions. Reg Holdsworth in *Coronation Street* is a good example. Again, the programme uses the self-conscious linking technique of shifting to a scene involving characters who have been the subject of a conversation in the previous scene. As Jordan argues:

My argument then is that *Coronation Street*, though deploying the devices of the Soap Opera Realism upon which it is based, far from attempting to hide the artifice of these devices (other than by the generic imperative to hide) rather asks us to take pleasure in its artistry, much as a stage magician will not show us how his tricks are done yet never claims . . . that he has actually sawn a woman in half. (p. 39)

Jordan's view of *Coronation Street* suggests that there can be a substantial dislocation of realism's effects. Such dislocation may, of course, be even more noticeable in other sorts of programme which set out to *play* with reality (*The Singing Detective*, for example).

N. Abercrombie, *Television and Society*, Polity Press, 1996, pp. 26–30

The extract by Nicholas Abercrombie considers various different theories about the nature of realism on television. As Abercrombie notes, this debate is complicated by the fact that 'realism' itself is associated with a set of codes and conventions that we recognise as 'real' or 'realistic' but are in fact as artificial and constructed as any other media text. Abercrombie suggests that for most viewers the news on television appears to be realistic, an impression enhanced by its sense of 'liveness': 'not only is it describing reality, it is giving us the events as they happen'. However, we also recognise that it is not real but a highly mediated version of events. Abercrombie argues that what television realism offers is essentially a 'construction of reality which is not deliberately misleading, but which cannot hope to speak for everyone's experience and understanding of the world.

It is probably easiest if we accept that realism is itself a system of codes and conventions that represent world events in a particular manner which we accept as 'true to life', in so far as this is possible. Abercrombie suggests that current affairs, news and documentary programmes are regarded as the most realistic television genres. However, the way in which the subject is selected and framed by the camera, the use of narration or voice-over and the very choice of subject matter, all lead to a certain construction or representation of reality. Abercrombie refers to the ideas of Colin MacCabe (1981a, 1981b) who argues that 'Television presents one reality and audiences are persuaded to accept it as the only reality . . . a dominant point of view, that of the narrator, which is presented as the natural, transparent one'. Some might argue that different audiences will interpret programmes in different ways, making judgements about the degree of realism contained in particular texts. A documentary programme suggesting that there is a high level of alcohol abuse amongst university students may seem realistic to someone who has no direct experience of university life, but may seem artificial and biased to someone who is a university student.

## ACTIVITIES

- 'Documentaries, like plays, novels and poems, are fictional forms' (Frederick Wiseman, American film-maker). What do you think Wiseman meant by this statement? Do you agree with Wiseman's view? Discuss with reference to a range of documentary material. (NEAB Paper, 2 June 1997)
- 'Documentary makers attempt to do more than just entertain their audiences.' Do you agree? Refer to specific examples in your answer. (AQA Unit, 2 June 2001)

## NEW HYBRIDS

As we have argued, 'documentary' is a term that is used by broadcasters and audiences alike to refer to an ever-expanding body of texts. In the last ten years there have been numerous documentary spin-offs, rips-offs and cast-offs. These have extended the documentary genre in a number of ways which have collectively served to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, and to complicate what we might consider to be the documentary project. Unlike the reflexive and performative modes, docu-soap and Reality TV, which we consider next, blur boundaries in less reflexive or critical ways. Their popularity has had an impact on the shape of contemporary television documentary and there is now considerable international trade of such formats. These forms have also opened up debates concerning documentary's access and representation of the real. As with the texts above, such discussions have provided viewers with opportunities to reflect critically on the documentary project.

### Docu-soap

As the name suggests, this particular spin-off combines aspects of documentary with those of soap opera, and to date appears to have developed most successfully in the United Kingdom. Docu-soap producer Andrew Bethell has argued that the 'docu-soap has been the most significant development in recent British television'. The success of the British versions of this form has in turn spawned numerous copies in New Zealand, Australia and the United States.

These hybrid texts tend to take shape around an 'exposé' or 'behind the scenes' look at large institutions – especially those that have day-to-day contact with 'the public'. Their documentariness lies in their claim to present real people, places and events. Utilising the observational mode, or 'fly-on-the-wall' techniques, these programmes present a slice of 'naturally' occurring everyday life. This visual mode of spontaneous reality is undercut slightly by an often-used authoritative voice-over which guides viewers through the narrative. Unlike the documentaries of Wiseman, for example *Hospital* (1970) in which intimate portrayals of institutions are used to raise broader ideological questions, docu-soap merely makes a spectacle out of the ordinary.

These programmes gain their credibility through their association with the documentary form, but their appeal lies in the way in which their narratives are constructed along the lines of soap opera. Like the fictional serial form, these programmes usually have several narrative strands which are on-going, and although such programmes are limited to series lengths of six to twelve weeks, narrative closure is deferred as long as possible. Individual episodes usually contain a summary of the various narrative strands, allowing new viewers to catch up and regular viewers to re-visit major themes and characters. Here, an argument is only indirectly constructed, with instead a main narrative drive coming from the personal experiences of the central personalities. These programmes explicitly make 'stars' out of ordinary people, with their experiences rendered worthy of our scrutiny, an agenda which also has the interesting effect of foregrounding the performance of identity itself.

These programmes make good use of the recent lighter, smaller cameras which make observational filming less intrusive and cumbersome. Yet we are typically made acutely aware of the presence of both the camera and the crew. Very often the 'stars' of the programme will talk directly to the camera in a quasi-confessional style. Although sometimes their comments are directed more widely towards the imagined viewer, often we as viewers feel as though we are being given direct access to a private interaction between an individual and the crew.

Many of these programmes have been criticised for staging sequences, most famously scenes from UK *Driving School*. Interestingly, the realisation that the presence of the camera and crew are having an impact on the social actors and action, while implicitly pointing to the constructed nature of these texts, seems

to do little to challenge the 'reality' or the 'documentariness' of the form. Having said this, it is possible to argue that through such a foregrounding of the constructed nature or 'performed' nature of such representations, a space is opened up for viewers to engage more critically and reflexively with the form. In this sense, although docu-soap does not seem to reflect the questioning stance toward documentary of either the reflexive or performative mode, it can still be grouped with those developments which work to challenge documentary proper.

### Reality TV

Another hybrid documentary form is reality TV, which is distinctive because it pairs documentary traits with fictional aesthetic devices. By this we mean that it maintains the claims for access to the real, while presenting this reality in a highly popularised and stylised manner. Reality TV, with its characteristically shaky hand-held camera, gives the impression of unmediated, spontaneous action, captured as it happens. Yet these are also the aspects which alert us to the presence of the camera and thus the constructed nature of the representations on offer. Such programming seems both to extend a particular mode of documentary (the observational mode) and to reinforce its claims to give direct access to the real, yet it potentially also contains a critique of such modes and their truth claims. These new hybrid reality formats make careful attempts to establish their public service credentials by claiming an educative role, and by arguing that such programmes encourage viewers to help solve crimes. However, they owe more to tabloid sensationalism and similarly reflect the need to entertain and retain large audiences. In ideological terms, it is significant that their investigative potential is muted and they do little to challenge the dominant order.

Docu-soap and Reality TV are connected to mock-documentary because they too have developed in the spaces between fact and fiction. These formats can be regarded as a response to both changing economic and broadcasting contexts, but their most interesting aspect is their apparent relation to some of the critiques offered by postmodern theorising. While docu-soap and reality TV seem to offer very little in the way of a critique of documentary, they can be seen as representing a popularisation of a postmodern scepticism toward the expert and the professional. Both of these formats are built around lay experiences and perspectives, rather than that of the experts so central to certain documentary modes. They both reject professionalism for a more general amateurism which is seen as being more truthful or 'authentic'.

## Docudrama.

### DOCUDRAMA

The docudrama is a fact-based representation of real events. It may represent contemporary social issues--the "facts-torn-from-today's-headlines" approach--or it may deal with older historical events. U.S. television examples include *Brian's Song* (1971), the biography of Brian Piccolo who played football for the Chicago Bears but died young from cancer, *Roots* (1977), the history of a slave and his family, *Roe vs. Wade* (1989), the history of the Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, *Everybody's Baby: The Rescue of Jessica McClure* (1989,) the rescue of an eighteen-month-old baby from a well, and three versions of the Amy Fisher and Joey Buttafuoco affair (1993). The sources of the form derive from 19th- and 20th-century journalism, movies, and radio.

In most cases, a docudrama is produced in the manner of realist theater or film. Thus, events are portrayed by actors in front of an invisible "fourth wall"; shooting techniques obey the conventions of mainstream film or television (i.e., establishing shots with shot/reverse shots for dialogue, lighting constructed in a verisimilar manner, non-anachronistic mise-en-scene); no voice-over narrator comments on the actions once the events begin; and little or no documentary footage is interspersed. Unlike mainstream drama, however, the docudrama does make claims to provide a fairly accurate interpretation of real historical events. In other words, it is a non-fictional drama.

Thus, the docudrama is a mode of representation that, as its name reflects, combines categories usually perceived as separate: documentary and drama. This transgression, however, is not an actual one. Texts that claim to represent the real may be created out of various sorts of documents such as photographs, interviews, tape recordings of sounds, printed words, drawings, and narrators who attempt to explain what happened. Non-fictional texts may also use actors to re-enact history. In all cases, the real is being represented and is thus never equal to the reality it represents. Some people even point out that having any filmic recording of an event is a "text" with the same status as these other types of documents: film footage is necessarily taken from a particular angle and thus is an incomplete representation of an event.

The docudrama should be distinguished from fictional dramas which make use of reality as historical context but do not claim that the primary plot line is representing events that have actually occurred. An example of such a fictional use of history would be an episode in *Murphy Brown* in which Brown insists on questioning President Bush



Eleanor and Franklin: The White House

One reservation is related to "dramatic license." In order to create a drama that adheres to the conventions of mainstream story-telling (particularly a sensible chain of events, a clear motivation for character behavior, and a moral resolution), writers may claim they need to exercise what they call dramatic license--the creation of materials not established as historical fact or even the violation of known facts. Such distortions include created dialogues among characters, expressions of internal thoughts, meetings of people that never happened, events reduced to two or three days that actually occurred over weeks, and so forth. Critics point out that it is the conventions of mainstream drama that compel such violations of history while writers of docudramas counter that they never truly distort the historical record. Critics reply that the dramatic mode chosen already distorts history which cannot always be conveniently pushed into a linear chain of events or explained by individual human agency.

Another reservation connected to the first is the concern that spectators may be unable to distinguish between known facts and speculation. This argument does not propose that viewers are not sufficiently critical but that the docudrama may not adequately mark out distinctions between established facts and hypotheses, and, even if the docudrama does mark the differences, studies of human memory suggest that viewers may be unable to perceive the distinctions while viewing the program or remember the distinctions later.

A third reservation focuses on the tendency towards simplification. Critics point out that docudramas tend toward hagiography or demonization in order to

which Brown insists on questioning President Bush at a press conference and is then thrown out. The use of the real person Bush as backdrop to a fictional plot creates a "reality effect" for the fictional program but would not qualify the episode to be a docudrama.

Docudramas do not have to conform to the above aesthetic conventions. An early U.S. example of a series devoted to re-enacting past events is *You Are There*. *You Are There* derived from the radio program CBS *Is There* which ran from 1947 through 1950. On television it appeared from February 1953 through October 1957. *You Are There* violated the traditional taboo of avoiding anachronisms by having contemporary television reporters interview historical figures about the events in which they were supposed to have been participating, for example, during the conquest of Mexico.

The *You Are There* form for a docudrama, however, is very unusual. Most docudramas employ standard dramatic formulas from mainstream film and television and apply them wholesale to representing history. These conventions include a goal-oriented protagonist with clear motivations; a small number of central characters (two to three) with more stereotyping for secondary characters; causes that are generally ascribed to personal sources rather than structural ones (psychological traumas rather than institutional dynamics); a dramatic structure geared to the length of the program (a two-hour movie might have the normal "seven-act" structure of the made-for-television movie); and an intensification of emotional ploys.

The desire for emotional engagement by the viewers (a feature valuable for maintaining the audience through commercials) produces an inflection of the docudrama into several traditional genres. In particular, docudramas may appeal to affects of suspense, terror, or tears of happiness or sadness. These affects are generated by emplotments of generic formulas such as the detective or thriller genre, the horror genre. Although the outcome was known in advance, *Everybody's Baby* operates in the thriller mode: how will Baby Jessica be saved? Judicial dramas such as *Roe vs. Wade* or murder dramas such as *Murder in Mississippi* (the death of three civil rights workers) use suspense as a central affective device. Examples of terror are docudramas of murders or attempted murders by family members or loved ones or of larger disasters such as the Chernobyl meltdown or plane crashes.

One of the most favored effects, however, is tears, produced through melodramatic structures. Some critics point out that docudramas tend to treat the "issue-of-the-week," and that such a concern for topical issues also produces an interest in social

toward hagiography or demonization in order to compress the historical material into a brief drama. Additionally, complex social problems may be personalized so that complicated problems are "domesticated." Adding phone numbers to call to find help for a social problem may be good but may also suggest sufficient solutions to the social problem are already in place.

Outside the United States many of these problems have been addressed in different, but related ways, and while the term docudrama is often used in a generic fashion, it may be applied to a range of forms. In the United Kingdom, for example, *Cathy Come Home* (1966), stands as one of the earliest and strongest explorations of the problem of homelessness. Created by writer Jeremy Sandford, producer Tony Garnett, and director Ken Loach, this program refuses the more conventional structures of dramatic narrative, inserting strong "documentary" style photography into the presentation and using "Cathy's" own voice as narrator-analyst for the harsh social situation in which she finds herself. Another voice, however, presents factual information in the form of statistics and other information related to the central topic of the piece. *Cathy Come Home* has been described as a "documentary-drama," a term that seeks to emphasise the serious and factual qualities of the show against the more conventional docudrama.

In Australia versions of docudrama have often been used to explore social and national history. Productions such as *Anzacs*, *Gallipoli*, and *Cowra Outbreak* have focused on Australian participation in both World Wars and in some views are crucial texts in the construction of national identity.

In Canada, critics have applied the docudrama designation to a broader range of production styles, including works such as *The Valour and the Horror*, which combined documentary exploration with dramatized sequences. This program led to an ongoing controversy over the nature of the "real," and the "true." Because the presentation challenged received notions of Canadian involvement in World War II (notions themselves constructed from various experiences, memories, and records), the conflict took on an especially public nature. So, too, did arguments surrounding *The Boys of St. Vincent*, which dealt with child molestation in a church-run orphanage. The dramatization in this case was more complete, but clearly paralleled a case that was still in court at the time of production and airing.

What all these examples suggest is, on the one hand, that docudrama is a particularly useful form for television, whether for advertising profit, the exploration of social issues, the construction of identity and history, or some combination of these ends. On the other hand, the varied examples point to

topical issues also produces an interest in social problems that might have melodramatic resolutions. Docudramas have treated incest, missing children, wife or child abuse, teenage suicide, alcoholism and drug addiction, adultery, AIDs-related deaths, eating disorders, and other "diseases-of-the week." The highly successful *Brian's Song* which won five Emmys and a Peabody is an excellent example of this subtype of docudrama. Its open sentimentality and use of male-buddy conventions along with the treatment of an interracial friendship uses the event of an early death by cancer to promote images of universal brotherhood. *The Burning Bed* (1984) or *The Karen Carpenter Story* (1989) wages war against pressures producing, respectively, domestic violence or anorexia nervosa.

Such implicitly or explicitly socially-conscious programs, however, raise the problem of interpretation. Indeed, docudramas, like other methods of representing reality, are subject to controversy regarding their offer of historical information through story-telling. Although historians now recognize how common it is to explain history through dramatic narratives, historians are still concerned about what effects particular types of dramatic narratives may have on viewers. Debates about docudramas (or related forms such as "reality TV") include several reservations.

ends. On the other hand, the varied examples point to an ongoing aspect of television's status as a medium that both constructs narratives specifically defined as "fiction" and also purports to somehow record or report "reality." *You Are There* very early mixed "news," history, and fiction, categories often, and uncritically, considered distinct and separate. The mixture, the blurred boundaries among the conventions linked to these forms of expression and communication, and the public discussions caused by those blurrings and mixings, remain central to any full understanding of the practices and the roles of television in contemporary society.

-Janet Staiger

#### **FURTHER READING**

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See also *Cathy Come Home; Power Without Glory; Six Wives of Henry VIII; Valour and the Horror*

# Is it news, ad or infomercial?

*The line between news and advertising is  
going, going . . .*

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**As newspapers and broadcast stations scramble for new sources of advertising dollars, are old ethical standards getting lost in the shuffle?**

*by Doreen Carvajal*

The channel is tuned to Philadelphia's KYW-TV and the warm voice of a local television medical reporter invites viewers to ponder a serious matter of the heart. Their own.

For the next sixty minutes, the hosts of a special prime-time television show called "Health Test" lead viewers on an exploration of heart disease and health tips. They interview recovering patients from Albert Einstein Medical Center. They seek advice from cardiac specialists at Albert Einstein Medical Center. And occasionally the host rattles off a telephone hotline for questions: (800)-EINSTEIN.

So answer this "Health Test": Is this news? Is this a commercial? Is this the future?

"The entire program is produced with our involvement from start to finish with our doctors, our patients. We certainly have thrown out ideas. Some were taken, some fell flat," said Annemarie Armstrong, director of public relations for Einstein, the program's sponsor. "I have not seen any other television station come together in quite this way, but given the economics of television, perhaps it will change. I do think we are on the leading edge."

Given economic pressures, television, magazines and newspapers have been casting for new forms of revenue and in that struggle ethical standards can become elastic.

For the industry of information, the present state of the economy is quite possibly the worst in two decades.

Newspaper executives watched the advertising market ebb after the 1987 stock market crash and then dry up in 1988 and 1989 as recession began to take hold. For traditional television, the story was even bleaker: loss of momentum, market share and money.

As a result, media are focusing on ways to expand the old advertising base and in some cases cozier relationships between content and advertising have developed.

Some of it is clearly beneficial for the struggling companies. Some of it is not so clearly beneficial for the consumer who is expected to distinguish advertising from news.



It's not always easy to see through the blur of business.

- *Omni*, a consumer magazine on science and technology, devoted its November cover to first-time advertiser Motorola although the picture had no connections to the stories inside. Through a cut-out window of the cover, shined a silver hologram of a hand gripping a telephone. The pitch was the future of global communications.
- In the euphoria after the end of the Gulf war, the tabloid *Philadelphia Daily News* splashed its cover with "MILLER TIME — First Wave of Troops Back Home from Gulf." On page three, a local columnist declared the victory celebrations: "Miller Time, USA." On page 28, an advertisement appeared for a cash contest sponsored by the *Daily News* — and Miller High Life.
- *The Miami Herald* floats the idea of selling advertising space to companies that want to run verbatim news releases.
- Last year, the Federal Trade Commission filed six complaints against television stations that blended news formats with advertising in an increasingly popular hybrid — infomercials. Typically, the infomercials followed familiar and trusted news formats: a consumer self-help program, a talk show, a documentary, a news magazine.

The FTC's most serious complaint involved a \$1.5 million fine against Twin Star Productions of Scottsdale, Ariz., which was selling "Foliplexx," a baldness remedy, "Y-Bron," a male impotence treatment and "EuroTrym," an appetite suppressant patch endorsed by Ronald Reagan's son Michael. The FTC charged Twin Star's product claims were unsubstantiated and the infomercials misled viewers by masquerading as consumer shows rather than paid advertising.

"Some of these firms use the infomercial as a way to hide the fact that they are selling something and to give the sales effort more credibility than it deserves. That's when it gets bad," said Herbert Rotfeld, an associate professor of marketing at Auburn University in Alabama. Rotfeld and Patrick Parsons, an assistant professor of communications at Penn State University, launched a study of more than 1,000 television news managers to determine the ethical divide between advertising and news.

Their research showed the gap was as wide as the Snake River Canyon; anything could be rationalized.

"They were aware of the ethical difficulties associated with these infomercials and had misgivings about running them. But ultimately they ran because the economic pressures overcame their concerns and often the concerns were rationalized away by saying the consumer can tell infomercials — we have an obligation to our stockholders," said Parsons.

Rotfeld said he interviewed or received survey answers from more than 1,000 people, including cable news executives and television station managers. Everyone believed they were dutifully following universal standards, he said. But no one was.

"I talked to different television stations in the top 100 markets," Rotfeld said. "One says, 'It's our responsibility to look at these very closely; we won't accept things that look like

news.' Later, talking to a comparable officer in a similar station: 'We're not in a top-50 market, we basically take everything except autographed pictures of Jesus Christ.'

The blend of news and commercials dates back to a change in federal guidelines in 1984. The Reagan administration dropped a requirement that limited the time television stations could devote to commercials. That spawned home shopping networks that are 100-percent advertising along with half-hour and hour-long infomercials. Generally, such shows were confined to the ghetto of early morning hours on cable and UHF broadcast channels. But lately they have started to proliferate on regular broadcast television.

"The whole nature of television has changed from free outlets to VCRs, to satellites. So you have to change the way you do business," said Jerry Eaton, former chief of programming for KYW in Philadelphia and now head of KYW-TV Enterprises, a new division designed to create programming for individual advertisers.

"It's a different relationship between client and advertiser and television," he said. "My goal is to marry the needs of advertiser with the needs of the viewer."

Recently, Eaton's division shot a pilot for a new half-hour program dubbed "On-Sale." It's a talk show format aimed at shopaholics and features bargains from local businesses that pay for the publicity. The show does not have a scheduled debut date yet, but there have been public reports that it could replace the station's floundering noon news, the 5:30 p.m. newscast or both.

The same division has also created two hour-long medical shows sponsored by Einstein Hospital and hosted by a medical reporter who appeared in the station's regular newscasts.

Eaton said producers have to be open with viewers about the programming by airing tag lines. "There's no percentage in fooling the viewer," he said. "There's nothing sinister about it. It's useful to viewers and useful to advertisers."

But there were no tag lines for the station's first "Health Test" show although announcements were made about the hospital's sponsoring role.

Keith Love, a *Los Angeles Times* political reporter turned corporate executive for the McClatchy Newspapers chain in Sacramento, argues that a new appreciation of advertisers is not entirely unhealthy.

"The newspaper business has finally woken up to the fact that they cannot take these things for granted," said Love, who is an assistant to the vice president for operations at McClatchy.

That may mean running travel section stories about cruises during the same season when people can actually board the ships and advertisers are running their promotions, according to Love.

"But if any advertiser gets the sense that a paper is for sale," Love warned, "then you've given it away."

*Doreen Carvajal is a reporter for The Philadelphia Inquirer.*

For a response from Philadelphia Daily News Editor Zachary Stahlberg, see **"Letter to the editor"**.

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## A Capsule Guide to Docudramas

by Steve Lipkin

<http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue01/features/docudram.htm>

One need look no further than any issue of TV Guide to find evidence of the immense popularity of docudrama. Feature film docudrama has expanded beyond the traditional turf of the biopic (Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*; Tina Turner's trials in *What's Love Got to Do With It*) to personalize broad social issues (the Oliver Stone/Jim Garrison "outlaw history" of the Kennedy assassination in *JFK*; the holocaust in *Schindler's List*; the victim's view of the British legal system in *In The Name of the Father*).

Recent features range from women's professional baseball (*A League of Their Own*) to medical breakthroughs (*Awakenings*) to naval history (*The Bounty*). TV movies-of-the-week bring front page news stories to living rooms with astonishing rapidity. Beyond the usual disease-of-the-week offerings audiences



can relive vicariously disasters with *Tragedy of Flight 103: The Inside Story*), abuse (*The Boys of St. Vincent*), ill-fated affairs (*The Amy Fisher Story* [ABC]/*Amy Fisher: My Story* [NBC]/*Casualties of Love: The Long Island Lolita Story* [CBS]), and contemporary courtroom

Re

Holly Hunter in  
*The Positively  
True Adventures  
of the Alleged  
Texas Cheerleader-  
Murdering Mom*.

spectacles (*Honor Thy Father and Mother: The True Story of the Menendez Murders* [Fox]/*Menendez: A Killing in Beverly Hills* [CBS]; *The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader Murdering Mom*).

Why is a form capable of covering such a huge range of characters, topics and events so appealing? The sense that these films provide an inside view of how something might have "really" happened offers only a partial answer. A film may stem from well-known figures, events, or published accounts, but notoriety is not necessarily essential in order to reach an audience.

Docudrama fuses documentary material with melodrama, so that much of its strength must result from its emphasis on emotion, its preference for family iconography, and the power of its argument for a moral view of reality-based subject matter. *In the Name of the Father*, for example, examines Irish/English political tensions through their impact on the Conlon family as it condemns

unjust British suppression. Schindler's factory workers become the family he saves from destruction in Nazi concentration camps. The title of *A League of Their Own* suggests how teams of women ballplayers struggled to overcome barriers to success, only to find it temporary, brought to an end with the end of the war and the return of men to resume their "rightful" places at work, and women theirs, at home.

Like melodrama generally, docudrama argues that lost or elusive moral perspectives can be regained. While the actuality a work recreates may show the exercise of right and wrong thrown into jeopardy, the docudramatization of actual people, incidents and events ultimately restores a sense of a moral system at work. The world here can still be a place where on some scale, in some way, the struggle for a balance between right and wrong attains coherence.

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**A few sample docudramas on video:**

- Malcolm X (Warner Home Video)
- What's Love Got to Do With It (Touchstone Video)
- Schindler's List (MCA/Universal)
- JFK (Warner Home Video)
- In the Name of the Father (MCA/Universal)
- A League of Their Own (Columbia)
- Awakenings (RCA/Columbia)
- The Bounty (Vestron)
- The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader Murdering Mom (HBO)
- The Tragedy of Flight 103 (Live Home Video)
- The Boys of St. Vincent (New Yorker Films Video)
- The Amy Fisher Story (Image Pictures Video)
- Casualties of Love: The Long Island Lolita Story (Columbia/Tristar Video)
- Honor Thy Father and Mother: The Menendez Killings (Wea Video)