



FORMATS, GENRES AND POETIC POSSIBLE WORLDS Taxonomy for the Study of Audiovisual Seriality

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the state of the art in narrative genre and format concepts, demonstrating the laxity of the former and justifying the analytical practicality of the latter. It proposes a 12-parameter tool for taxonomising serialised audiovisual fiction formats. The application of this tool to case studies that will also examine plot structures will help to identify the determinants (possibilities and limitations) that certain production variables, initially considered merely technical or formal, impose on content development. These include the narratives and the poetic possible worlds in which they unfold.

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1. Introduction

In the discourse on television series, the notions of format and narrative genre coexist and refer to partly coinciding and partly distinct issues. In general, all scholars in the field are obliged to clarify and differentiate between the two concepts, and ultimately to justify the use of one, the other or both. In the field of reception, critics and audiences, the notion of genre is more common, as it immediately alludes to issues of human interest and the kind of aesthetic experience that interests the audience. In the field of industry, the concept of format is established, which is crucial for the planning of a television series, as it clearly and precisely defines many material and formal elements that must be adopted by all the actors involved in the production.

The aim of this work is to develop a clear and precise tool for a taxonomy of formats for the poetic and narrative study of fiction series. The reasons are not rhetorical. The constant use of the word format in the professional world invites its use in academic work. The concept has a clear practical utility that facilitates understanding between the various actors in the audiovisual industry. Moreover, the precision with which format determines the factors of production makes it possible to study rigorously how format affects the possibilities and limits of dramatic action and the poetic world in which it takes place.

Although this work is primarily concerned with the formal aspects of production, including seriality, self-conclusiveness, average chapter length, periodicity, and so forth, it is developed from a broader perspective. Our approach is rooted in the classical tradition, as inaugurated by Aristotle's *Poetics*, which posits that the essence of narrative lies in the "mimesis of human action". People derive pleasure from learning, and the good stories of television serials facilitate this process by allowing viewers to identify with the characters and situations portrayed (Gutiérrez Delgado, 2023). Given that human action occurs within a world characterised by its own inherent possibilities and limitations, it is possible to extend classical poetics by conceptualising plot as a "mimesis of the world" (Ricoeur, 1987). Although the mimesis of the world is not merely a catalogue of quantifiable elements, but rather an invisible structure that orders them, identifying and quantifying these elements is an essential preliminary step in the analysis of each world.

The notion of the "poetic possible world" (Abellán-García Barrio, 2023; García-Noblejas, 1996) allows us to establish a causal and organic link between some of the factors of production that identify and qualify the formats of television seriality and the possibilities and limits of the human and secular affairs they deal with. It is, therefore, a notion that establishes a meeting place, the fictional world, for an interdisciplinary dialogue between the television serial industry and the human and social sciences concerned with explaining our world and our unique position in it. In this way, the spontaneous learning and enjoyment provided by the series will be joined by an academic and rigorous one, turning the fictional series into a "method of knowledge". This exercise has already been tried on at least one occasion: an analysis of the format of the series *Spider-Man* (Bob Richardson, 1994-98) shows that the procedural (first, third and fourth seasons) hinders the possibilities of developing the private or personal life of Peter Parker/Spider-Man, a theme that is favoured in the second season of the series, which is closer to the serial (Encinas Cantalapiedra & Morgado Gonçalves, 2024).

We are aware that the discussion around the concepts of genre and format is inexhaustible. There is also a certain blurring of the two terms, as well as borrowing from the realm of formats to that of genres and vice versa, which often creates more chaos. We are also aware that the boundaries between formats (as with genres) can be blurred in times when the phenomenon of hybridisation (Murillo Rincón, 2023) also contributes to this terminological vagueness.

In the first part of this paper, we review the state of format theory and its use in the industry, and we will see that the term can be misleading. We will try to explain and overcome this ambiguity. We will then contrast the two terms, format and genre, pointing out seven differences and four similarities between the two concepts in order to contribute to an operational conceptual clarification. This contrast allows us to adopt a taxonomy of formats and, at the same time, to save the qualification of genre as a typical and variable specificity of some formats. Our aim is not essentialist: we do not seek a definitive, irrefutable and logically unquestionable solution, but an operational one. The reason for this is that the notions of format and genre with which both producers and audiences deal are pragmatic and, to a large extent, conventional.

The distinctive aspect of this work lies on the fact that the practicality we pursue is not situated within the realm of the factors of production, despite the fact that our taxonomy encompasses several of these factors. Instead, our focus is on the domain of reception. We are solely interested in those factors of production that, in addition to establishing a format, have narrative implications that shape the type of story that can be told and the type of world in which that story can be developed.

Our format taxonomy takes up previous work and attempts a reasonable synthesis by identifying 12 production parameters, each with four levels. This tool makes it possible, on the one hand, to identify and classify the series in the format categories that are currently canonical in the audiovisual industry and, on the other hand, to identify the production factors that determine some of the possibilities and limits of the plots and the possible poetic worlds in which they develop.

Although we propose here some of these format-plot-world determinations, citing specific cases proposed by other authors, a systematic study that allows us to draw comparable and contrasting conclusions will only be possible by adopting a taxonomic tool such as the one proposed here and applying it to different case studies. Such an exercise will give continuity to the research initiated here.

2. Background

The concept of format has two different meanings in the television serial industry. The first is typically used in the global commercial market: it is a concept that facilitates the commercialisation of a finished idea (*inventio* and *dispositio*, in classical rhetoric) that is sufficiently precise to be the subject of a patent (which protects intellectual property) and which then allows it to be offered, bought and, finally, realised with the provision of a licence (*elocutio*) in the various local markets. The second sense is typically used in the creative or productive sphere, during the ideation phase. During the planning of an audiovisual product, a number of material and formal aspects are determined which give a sufficiently precise idea of the costs and means of production and distribution of the audiovisual product. These factors also provide scriptwriters with sufficient information about what is expected of their work. In the audiovisual industry, the notion of narrative genre has a less precise and less pragmatic status, more of an auxiliary one, inherited from the film industry and, even earlier, from literature. This section is devoted to clarifying these three issues.

2.1. The Format in the Singular Sense

A format is a basic structure of content, some of which is immutable and some of which is adaptable (Chalaby, 2015, p. 10). Furthermore, "a television format is the structure of a programme that can generate a distinctive narrative and is licensed outside its country of origin to be adapted for local audiences" (Chalaby, 2015, p. 13).

The formats are specified in the so-called bible or writers' guide (as they called it in *Lost*), a document which usually begins with an introduction known as a "concept" and which sets out the differentiation of the series (another key element), that is, what makes it different from others to which it might resemble. Not surprisingly, the word concept is sometimes identified with the meaning of format in the singular. Thus, for Guebel, format:

[...] is the concept or idea of a programme that has a unique combination of elements (scenography, rules, dynamics, thematic, drivers...) that makes it unique and clearly differentiates it from others. It must also be adaptable and applicable to different territories and cultures without losing its essence and purpose". (Guebel, in Saló, 2003, p. 16).

Format policy has benefited from (and perhaps been a consequence of) the phenomenon of *glocalisation*, which has its roots in Japan (*dochakuka*, literally "he who lives in his own land"), but which was first defined by (Pedro, 2022, p. 20) in the early 1990s, when the phenomenon was already a fact, although it had not been described in the literature of the field and no one had yet chosen a name for it.

In the field of television, *glocalisation* refers to the adaptation of the format from one market to another. It is often confused with the concept of remake, which is not very accurate, since adapting the format does not necessarily mean adapting the scripts. Format shopping allows the essential elements of the series to be used, without contradicting the unchangeable part mentioned by Chalaby, but

compromising themes or plots that are replaced or supplemented by others not envisaged in the original series. A perhaps extreme example of this is the early series *Neighbours* (Baena, 1993), a *glocalised* adaptation of *Coronation Street* (Warren, 1960), which has been on the air in its original market since 1960 up to the time of writing. It is perhaps the longest-running series in the history of European television. The Spanish version, however, was one of the most short-lived, not even completing its first season. The characters and stories had almost nothing to do with each other.

The justification of the word format in all these contexts therefore refers to the singular work that can be adapted to a local market with local actors. The format is constituted by a set of rules that serve to differentiate an audiovisual work that can be serialised. This interpretation is more market-oriented, and it does not concern itself with poetics or narrative.

2.2. Format as a Classification Category

As is the case with the terms "archive" and "recording format" in relation to audiovisual works (35 mm, MPEG-4, DCP, etc.), or "presentation format" in relation to presentations (projection, broadcasting, online transmission, etc.), the term can be used with different nuances in the field of production, on the one hand, and in the field of narration, on the other. This is without prejudice to the requirement of univocality between the terms. It is permissible to employ the term with nuances that are inapplicable to the field of production.

As Buonnano points out:

The identification and differentiation of the various formats is contingent upon the examination of structural elements, which include the number of parts – ranging from a single unit, as exemplified by the television film, to thousands in the case of the series – the duration, which may be 25 or 50 minutes or other time units, the periodicity, which may be daily, weekly or otherwise, and the morphology of the segments, which may include independent episodes, continuous chapters or a combination of both. Furthermore, an analysis of narrative formulae may also be conducted, including whether there is a final conclusion, unlimited openings or an intermediate position between the open and the closed serial. Each of the aforementioned fiction formats – namely, the television film, miniseries, series, open and closed serials – is characterised by a specific combination and relationship between these or possibly other elements (Buonnano, 2005, pp. 7-8).

If different (singular) formats present some defining constants of content, we can speak of format in the sense of a plurality of similar individuals. This is the other meaning of the word, format as a taxonomic category, which includes sitcom, drama, serial, strip, miniseries, anthology series, and so on. Similarly, in the domain of non-fiction and entertainment, one can refer to magazine programmes, shows, mini-competitions, quiz shows, and so forth. Similarly, in the domain of non-fiction and entertainment, one can categorize programs as magazine shows, talk shows, mini-competitions, quiz shows, and so forth.

This is a different meaning of the term, which is aimed more at a classification that clarifies and relates the contents, differences and similarities between them, as well as the ways in which the script, or substance of the content, is constructed. In this context, the term "format" is used as an inclusive designation within the same group, referring to a set of individuals that are similar in their less modifiable characteristics. Conversely, if the definition of format has been specified in the individual case as the formula that allows the export of plot, characters, plots, etc., for reworking within certain limits of difference, those marked by the licence, format can be understood as a category, and thus as a term that could be applied to other similar ones. This is why the sitcom is referred to as a format, and the example of "Friends" is also regarded as a sitcom "format".

The following outlines what format is for Carrasco.:

A set of particular formal attributes of a specific programme that enable it to be distinguished and differentiated from other programmes, without recourse to the content of each programme as a demarcation criterion (Carrasco Campos, 2010, p. 180).

The cover of many Bibles provides a clear indication of the format it is intended to describe, thus ensuring that the essence of what it is is apparent from the outset. In some cases, this is inferred from the description itself.

In this sense, format may also be defined as a set of structural and systematic rules, which permit the classification and grouping of similar series. However, how does the concept of format differ from that of genre? In general, it is challenging to discern a clear distinction between the two concepts.

It is important to acknowledge that the distinction between genres and formats is not always clear-cut. This is particularly evident when we consider that the concept of television genre as we understand it today was shaped by its closest predecessor, cinema, where the concept of genre is much more deeply entrenched. Consequently, the term "film genre" can be understood as "an organisational form, a device that creates boundaries between different contents, in which there are analogies and repetitions" (Rodríguez, 2002, p. 19). This form of classification primarily aims to group films according to their shared characteristics and themes, with some instances of transgression (Melgarejo Moreno & Rodríguez Rosell, 2012, p. 180).

Some authors argue that the term "genre" should be understood as a highly inclusive concept, encompassing "format" as a more specific category (Carrasco Campos, 2010, p. 180). It is evident that genre and format have historically been used to describe concepts that are not entirely synonymous, yet also have some degree of overlap. If we are to adhere to established traditions, it is not feasible to subsume one concept into the other, or vice versa. Nevertheless, it is feasible to combine the two terms in order to present a more accurate representation of the subject in question. In the present case, given that a format is defined by a number of parameters or components, it can be stated that one of them is based on a genre or, conversely, on a number of genres.

The format can be characterised as follows: "The plot type, degree of continuity, number of scenes, number of main and secondary characters, their mode of construction (realistic psychology and caricature, among others), the type of numbers of sets, the length of the episode, among others." (Encinas Cantalapiedra, 2023, p. 288). The format can also be characterised by the diversity of genres it may encompass (Gómez Martínez & García García, 2011).

In the context of the sitcom, for instance, the expectation is that the genre in question will be comedy. However, this can be presented in a number of different ways, including as a parody or a satire. Conversely, the serial format allows for a greater degree of experimentation, with the coexistence of disparate genres. These may include romance, urban comedy, social drama, thriller, supernatural horror, science fiction, fantasy, and more. It is possible to identify series in which one genre clearly predominates, as exemplified by *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019). Alternatively, series may contain a mixture of multiple genres like *Dallas* (Jacobs, 1978); *Al salir de clase* (Cuadri, Jongen, Zaramella, 1997) y *Coronation Street* (Warren, 1960).

The result is sustained as a result of the pact of verisimilitude that is established between the work and the spectator, once the latter has accepted the contingencies of the format. This is to say that the terms of the so-called "fiduciary contract" have been met, as is extensively studied by the Entrevernes group (Peña Timón, 2001, p. 60). As a result of this agreement, we consent to the imposition of veracity in exchange for a playful presentation that elicits gratification, a cinematic experience. Otherwise, it would be challenging to comprehend why certain a priori implausible scenarios in some "soap operas" do not erode the relationship between the text and the spectator. Notable examples of this phenomenon can be observed in the television series *Santa Barbara* (Dobson, 1984), which features an alien abduction, and *Dallas* (Jacobs, 1978), which incorporates the intrusion of the UFO phenomenon.

2.3. The State of Genre in the Audiovisual Universe

As Altman has pointed out, the need for genre arises from another prior need, that of content guidelines that are useful to the audience, the exhibitor-programmer, the distributor and the studios/producers (Altman, 2000, p. 38). Studios, broadcasters or platforms often commission films by asking them to meet specific requirements of a narrative genre because they sense that this set of guidelines is, or may be, of interest to their audiences at a particular time. It is one of the possible strategies they have to formulate a market opportunity.

From Aristotle to Todorov, a prominent proponent of genre theory, the concept of genre has been subjected to numerous challenges. The advent of postmodernism established the supremacy of auteur cinema, despite the evident applicability of the term "genre auteur" to established auteurs such as Alfred Hitchcock, creating an apparent antinomy. Robert McKee posits that auteur cinema can be considered a distinct genre, which he terms "art film" (McKee, 1999, p. 86). However, if we view auteur cinema as a form of expression that defies classification due to its originality, it appears ill-advised to create a genre label for a cinematic style that adheres to a single unifying principle: the absence of genre conventions. It is, in essence, a catch-all term.

The current moment, which Lipovetsky calls 'hypermodernity', continues the trend towards hybridisation, even connecting the hybridisation of genres with the hybridisation of formats:

[the genre/format hierarchy] should not be interpreted as a regulator of the decision to mix elements of a genre and features of a format. In the creation of a new fictional television programme, hybridisations may arise from horizontal relationships such as Format-Format, Format-Genre and/or Genre/Genre (Murillo Rincón, 2023, p. 177).

3. Similarities and Differences

In an effort to clarify our position, which despite the difficulties and debates already mentioned, is a traditional one in the industry, we will now present seven generally accepted differences between genre and format, and then the four coincidences that nourish the fusion of the two concepts.

3.1. The Seven Differences

First, the format of a given work can be defined by the number of genres it contains and the quality of those genres. The reverse is not true. In the course of our research we did not come across any case where format was used to justify the inclusion or exclusion of a particular genre. Furthermore, the existing literature has not identified the likelihood of the presence of one, a few or many formats as an explanatory factor for genre. It can therefore be concluded that neither the quantity nor the quality/diversity of formats can be said to influence the inclusion/non-inclusion of a work in a genre. Conversely, the quantity and quality/diversity of genres can be identified as a factor that allows the work to be included in a particular format. It can be seen as a reliable indicator.

A study conducted at the beginning of this century on children's cognitive interests in reading books distinguished the possible interactions between the genre of a work and its publication format (Moschovaki & Meadows, 2005). However, there is a paucity of studies on the interaction between genre and format in the audiovisual field. It is evident that reality presents a number of intriguing cases that warrant investigation from both genre and format perspectives. To illustrate, the miniseries *WandaVision* (Schaeffer, 2021) was a pioneering example of a format combining two formats, as if they were two series glued together. On the one hand, an action miniseries and, on the other, a soft sitcom, centred on a character who tries to escape suffering through the unrealised potential of thoughts, expressed in an idealised, naïve and comic format, typical of the most classic sitcom. The format emulates a potential reality characterised by an idyllic nature, but in stark contrast to the harsh reality experienced by the characters (Higueras-Ruiz, 2023, pp. 117-127). The sitcom therefore exists as a subordinate narrative within a different, even antagonistic, format to that in which it is embedded.

Second, genre is concerned with identifying similarities in content, whereas format is concerned with identifying differences in structure that affect content. This factor, which can lead to confusion between narrative format and production format, is on the other hand a key differentiator between format and genre. The question, then, is: what production constraints/opportunities affect narrative? Most studies of narrative format define the object of study not only in terms of the strictly narrative components that shape it (characters, genres, plots, etc.), but also in terms of the production components (use of exteriors, *mise-en-scène*, etc.). It is relatively easy to see that both have an impact on the narrative characteristics of the work. Conversely, genre theory - often discussed in the context of the audiovisual field - is limited to identifying the archetypes that are most prevalent in each period, rather than examining their use or non-use. Format theory, on the other hand, shows a tendency towards stereotypical representations in certain formats, such as the sketch or the sitcom. Genre theory does not pay much attention to structural elements, except to acknowledge the prevalence of the three-act structure in narrative forms. Instead,

it focuses on identifying the most common structural patterns in the repertoire of universal stories, such as impossible love, revenge, interloper benefactor and rivalry (González Sánchez, 2010, pp. 100-122).

Third, the format shows a greater dependence on programming, understood as a macro discourse (Eco, 2012; Pereira Valarezo, 2008, p. 37). The supranarrators (García Jiménez, 1995, p. 121) or the policies of studios, platforms, networks, among others, design their production offer based on the consumption habits of the audience, market expectations, current trends and many other factors, including one of the most important: their programming schedule. As a result, they produce or commission content of a certain length, with a frequency that ensures sustainability and that fits as seamlessly as possible into the network's schedule or the platform's homepage - in other words, in line with their programming philosophy. Undoubtedly, genre is another criterion, but while genre merely guides content, format guarantees stable duration, periodicity and a defined slot within the programming cycle.

Where these differences are most apparent is in the exploitation, but they have a big impact on the writing, as the scriptwriter has to be aware of the limitations of the space allocated, as well as the details of the structure, in order to deliver what is required of him or her. This is something that does not change much with the advent of platforms. Platform series, even if they can be scheduled in their entirety on a single day, are looking for a specific audience response. Whether the strategy is to encourage binge-watching, or to delay delivery to avoid an exodus of subscribers at a low point in the season, the demands of the format, whatever they may be, are in line with principles that are sometimes similar to those of generalist television and sometimes less so.

Fourth, if the genre looks for archetypes and/or stereotypes in the characters, the format only confirms the likelihood of the presence of one or the other. The sitcom format, for example, operates within the stereotype, as does the strip or sketch (see Table 2), while other formats, such as the dramedy or anthology series, try to build characters around archetypes and delve into more complex psychologies. In genre theory, stereotyping is generally seen as undesirable (Pérez Ruffi, 2010), while in format theory it is simply seen as a characteristic. Genre theory relates the stereotype to the author's style, as a 'personal, identifiable and non-transferable, although imitable, imprint of a way of doing' (Caldevilla Domínguez et al., 2013). This is another dimension, different from that of the genre itself, and of course from that of the narrative format. The genre itself conditions the characteristics of the character (Pérez Ruffi, 2017), while the format is satisfied with presenting its possibilities of development and the simplicity/complexity of its characteristics.

Fifth, the format is less related to the type of plot than to the genre. For the genre, the dominant plot type, the plot type or plot archetype most likely to be found in each genre, defines its field of study as one of the keys to reinforcing the boundaries or dividing lines between one genre and another. For the format, the plot type is of no interest, since the greater or lesser presence of one or another plot type is never the key to establishing the condition of belonging or not belonging to the format. This is consistent with the fact that the format can be open to a wide variety of genres.

Sixth, genre expectations focus primarily on plot, whereas format expectations focus more on the structure and form of the content than on its content. Format is defined by elements that are more stable than genre, but less substantial and less conditioned by the substance of the content. Audience expectations revolve around a sum of very broad factors (cast, director, plot, genre...) and the concept of genre is more familiar to the audience than the idea of format. For the TV programmer, however, both are relevant. Format has more influence on the systematic habits of the audience and much less on the punctual predispositions of taste.

Seventh, format is a very useful category in television fiction, but its status and usefulness in relation to cinematography remains to be defined. The use of the concept of format is permanent in the field of serial fiction and almost nil in cinema, where the dominant format (as this concept is applied in the industry) is only one, and the exception is limited to the rare sagas and/or the also very rare sketch films, which are actually a collection of short films. The application given to cinema uses the industrial perspective rather than the narrative one, understood in terms of length (short, medium, feature and saga), which perhaps should not be considered narrative formats but rather presentation formats. Even in the academic field, when the comparison is made between genre and format, the format tends to be seen as something more television-like and the genre as something cinematographic, or it is applied in an external way to both, as for example when we talk about transmedia format to refer to the

materialisation of an idea or project through different means of communication, including written and audiovisual ones. For this reason, it is common to find references that include both categories in a perfectly compatible way, to analyse series that are evidence of specific formats and that at the same time are committed to very specific genres, as when we talk about a historical mini-series, for example: "mini-series" is the format, "historical" the genre.

3.2. The Four Look-Alikes

First, both genre and format presuppose the existence of certain characteristic rules that define the product. This is the most obvious similarity. Genre and format are used to classify as well as to create/produce. The benefits of classification affect industry, creators and academia. Industry seeks uniform standards to facilitate the movement of products in markets. Academics benefit from a sharper definition of categories, which in turn makes them more researchable and teachable. Finally, creators are the recipients of the knowledge that can be transferred from academia.

Second, genre, like format, is influenced by the trend towards hybridisation. We speak of hybrid genres as well as hybrid formats. In this context, it is as difficult to speak of pure genres as of pure formats, which should not be an obstacle to consolidating the definitions of one or the other. We have to understand that everything evolves and that the reality that surrounds us influences and transforms us. The fact that horror has evolved from the years of expressionism to the present day does not prevent us from understanding that *Nosferatu* (*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*; F.W. Murnau, 1922) and *Drácula, de Bram Stoker* (*Bram Stoker's Dracula*; Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) belong to the same genre. Although *I Love Lucy* (Asher, 1951) and *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre & Prady, 2007) have little in common in terms of the type of comedy they are (family and urban), both are undoubtedly sitcoms.

Third, format and genre in the audiovisual industry are human constructs that simplify a complex reality in order to make it more comprehensible and that are constructed from observation. It may be useful here to rescue the millennia-old discussion on genres, bequeathed to us by poetics and literary theory.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle introduces a series of distinctions that allow him to define different types of poetic genre. Today in literature we call these species "theoretical genres", "literary modes" or "natural genres" (Rodríguez Pequeño, 2008). Only three modes are possible: either a dramatic action is poeticised by narrating it (as is often the case in oral epic), or by representing or performing it (as in theatre), or by a mixture of the two. Since poeticising is the mimesis of action, different objects can be imitated: either actions better than those we usually recognise among ourselves (epic, tragedy) or inferior to the usual ones (comedy) are imitated - although here too the mixture or imitation of typical average actions is possible - or passions and feelings are imitated above all (lyric). In all cases, as the Greeks would say, imitation is done through a medium: language. As we can see, Aristotle uses both elements of content - objects imitated - and formal aspects - means and modes of imitation - to identify each type of poetics, without reducing the former to the latter or vice versa.

These distinctions have survived more than 2000 years of literary criticism and are enduring, since they correspond to the nature of human speech and action. However, literary studies has had to distinguish between these immutable, formally indisputable genres and the "historical genres" (the picaresque novel, for example), which have more precise and contingent characteristics: they appear, disappear, mutate or hybridise over time. It should even be added that natural genres have had and will continue to have their own particular history, the fruit of the inventiveness and creativity of poets. *Poetics* has come to include other means of imitation in addition to natural language, such as images.

Both natural genres (with basic determinations that allow a stable classification) and historical genres (more mutable) are the result of observation and experimentation: they work through inductive procedures that, rooted in some regularities of human behaviour, allow us to elaborate predictive and prescriptive models. Predictive because we, as viewers, assume expectations; prescriptive because they impose or advise us, as creators, on rules. In television, too, the need for the format arises spontaneously, as a result of observation, and soon acquires the same prescriptive and predictive character. Both the historical genres of literature and the notions of format and genre in the television industry belong to the realm of pragmatics, and there is no point - as with natural genres - in an essentialist discussion, only in an operational one.

Fourth, some elements of narrative discourse are used by both genres and formats to define themselves. This is the case with spaces or archetypes and stereotypes. Their presence or absence

makes it possible to define genres and formats, although we have already seen this in a very different sense. The genre qualifies the stereotype by recognising it as a pattern, while the format only notes its absence or presence, although the latter would be more of a difference.

4. The Operability of the Concept of 'Format'.

In order to develop the analytical tool we need, it is now necessary to define the operability of the concept of format on the basis of its parameters. We need to identify the parameters that allow us to classify a series as a parodic/sci-fi sitcom: *Plutón B.R.B. Nero* (De la Iglesia, 2008). Or a hospital drama like *Hospital Central*, (Mercero, Díaz y Gómez, 2000) versus a police procedural like *El Comisario* (Asorey & Del Moral, 1999), linking structure and content.

In network programming, continuity of episodes is a key factor in promoting horizontal synergy or audience flow, which carries the audience from one day to the next or from one week to the next, with the aim of achieving the highest possible ratings (Cortés, 1999). This continuity requires the use of more intense and frequent hooks or cliffhangers.

In a different context, the Bechdel test was first used to evaluate the gender gap in comics and was later applied to audiovisual media for numerous studies on the same topic (Corral Rey & Sandulescu Budea, 2022, pp. 185-199). Similarly, our aim here is to develop a comparable test that will serve as a tool for unambiguously categorising a work as belonging to one audiovisual format and not another. Alternatively, in the case of hybrid formats, it should help to determine the proximity or distance of the work to canonical formats.

Once we have identified and defined some of the parameters that shape the concept of format, it suffices to make a list of these parameters and determine their use in a specific series. On the basis of the available literature that we have synthesised here, we suggest that this test should include at least the following elements: seriality; self-contained episodes; duration (of each narrative unit, i.e, chapter or episode); frequency; type of protagonist characters through recurrence (fixed or variable); type of characters through referentiality (stereotypical or clichéd, archetypal or universal); type of acting; number of genres involved; whether the space is real or constructed; whether the tone is realistic or non-realistic; type of direction, whether more theatrical or cinematic; and transgressions of dramatic reality or the possible world it proposes (e.g, use or non-use of extra-diegetic laughter or other extra-diegetic elements).

We say “at least” because other parameters could potentially be added (e.g. the visibility of cliffhangers). The question of whether to include certain characteristics arises when we encounter distinguishing features that apply to only one or two formats. Looking at the list, we see that the discussion of extradiegetic laughter has required a broadening of the boundaries of the object of study. It is worth clarifying that this refers to extradiegetic elements equivalent to extradiegetic laughter in the sense of deliberately transgressing the relationship between text and audience, breaking the fictional world or the fourth wall.

Forms of humour closely related to sitcoms, such as the series *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-2020), have used direct-to-camera monologues without dramatic justification (not pretending that the recipient of this discourse is another character, as in a video diary, etc.). This can be seen as an alternative to audience presence within the discourse, equivalent to extradiegetic laughter. It does not include more conventional extradiegetic elements such as voice-over or extradiegetic music, which are more a matter of style.

Table 1. Format test

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Seriality	Unitary	-	-	Serial
2. Self-conclusiveness	Null	Baja	Media	High
3. Duration chap./epi.	<45'	45'-75'	76'-100'	>100'
4. Periodicity	Daily	-	-	Weekly
5. Characters (presence)	Fixed	-	-	Non-fixed

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
6. Characters (types)	Stereotypes	-	-	Archetypes
7. Interpretation	Naturalist	-	-	Overplayed
8. No. of genres involved	1-2	-	-	>2
9. Nature of space	Loc, Natural	Mixed	-	Constructed set
10. Tone	Realist	-	-	Unrealistic
11. Realisation	Theatrical	Semiteatral	Semi-cinema	Film
12. Extradiegetic laughter	Yes	-	-	No

Source: own elaboration, 2024.

A total of 12 items have been selected, each of which allows for up to four distinct presence/absence values. It is acknowledged that some items may occur, not occur, or occur to a moderate or frequent extent. In the case of items such as seriality or non-seriality, only extreme values are permitted; that is to say, the item is either unitary or serial. In such instances, the space of intermediate values is deemed to be unsuitable for consideration. In the case of point 4, it may be appropriate to utilise very rare periodicities, such as the monthly episode that is sometimes employed in the French system. In this instance, we have elected to utilise the two most prevalent categories, although the table can be modified and the indicator 'weekly' can be substituted with 'non-daily' should this be deemed necessary. Indicator 5 is concerned solely with the presence or absence of fixed characters in the series. It does not attempt to distinguish between the number of fixed characters and the number of non-fixed characters, as it has been demonstrated that this indicator is sufficient to clearly delineate formats such as genre series or anthology series. Other indicators indicate tendencies, such as towards stereotype or archetype, naturalistic or overacted performance, and so forth, rather than quantifiable absolute values. This mitigates inter-observer bias, although it slightly reduces the nuance of the observation.

According to this model, we can assert the following:

Table 2. Results by format

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Sketch	1	4	-	1/4	1/4	1	4	1	2	4	1	1
Strip	4	2	-	1	1	1	4	1	4	4	1	4
TV-movie	1	4	3/4	-	4	4	1	1	2	1	4	4
Sitcom	4	4	1	4*	1	1	4	1	4	4	1	1
Dramedia	4	2/3	2	4	1	4	1	1	2	1	2/3	4
Serial	4	1/2	1/2	1/2	1	1	1	4	2	4	2/3	4
Anthology	4	1/4	1/4	4	1/4	4	1	1	2	1	4	4
Genre	4	1	2	4	1/2	4	1	1	2	1	4	4
Miniseries	4	4	2	1/4	1	4	1	1	2	1	4	4

Source: own elaboration, 2024.

Table 2 comprises two columns: the first contains the formats, while the second contains the 12 parameters. The intersection of a format and a parameter within a box reflects the variable indicated in Table 1, which is represented by levels 1 to 4. In the case of the sitcom, the level of the periodicity parameter (4*) should be understood to refer to the regular first broadcast, rather than to the accidental rebroadcast or batch purchase.

An unexpected fact emerges here, which contributes to the differentiation between genre and format. With regard to genre, the criteria for belonging to it are not straightforward to specify. It is relatively straightforward to delineate the characteristics that define a Western and to identify the instances where the opposite is true. For some authors, *Curro Jiménez* (Romero-Marchent, 1976) is a western (García de Castro, 2002, p. 70), despite the fact that it is not set in the American West, the natural geography of the genre. Instead, it is set in Andalusia at the beginning of the 19th century, which

nevertheless displays clear similarities with the western genre in terms of characters, plots, the importance attributed to nature as opposed to urban life, the hero's sense of freedom, etc. This enables the term to be applied, albeit somewhat metaphorically.

It is reasonable to posit that a significant number of series will exhibit characteristics that align with multiple categories. This does not restrict the potential applications of the test; conversely, in such instances, the test serves to highlight potential areas of ambiguity that might otherwise remain unidentified.

In order to demonstrate the efficacy of this analytical instrument, we shall now apply it to a concrete example: episode 4 of the inaugural season of *The Big Bang Theory*:

Table 3. Implementation

Series: "The Big Bang Theory" T1 Ep. 4 <i>The luminous fish effect</i> (2007)				
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Seriality	Unitary	-	-	Serial
2. Self-conclusiveness	Null	Baja	Media	High
3. Duration chap./epi.	<45'	46'-75'	76'-100'	>100'
4. Periodicity	Daily	-	-	Weekly
5. Characters (presence)	Fixed	-	-	Non-fixed
6. Characters (types)	Stereotypes	-	-	Archetypes
7. Interpretation	Naturalist	-	-	Overplayed
8. No. of genres involved	1-2	-	-	>2
9. Nature of space	Loc, Natural	Mixed	-	Constructed set
10. Tone	Realistic	-	-	Unrealistic
11. Realisation	Theatrical	Semi-theatrical	Semi-cinema	Film
12. Extradiegetic laughter	Yes	-	-	No

Sitcom	4	4	1	4	1	1	4	1	4	4	1	1
"The Big Bang Theory", T1 Ep. 4	4	4	1	4	1	1	4	1	4	4	1	1

Source: own elaboration, 2024.

The results allow us to affirm that the episode analysed is 100% in line with the specificities of the sitcom. What happens if it does not? The results of the test will allow us to show precisely whether a series that tends towards the sitcom format, for example, has indicators of other formats. In this way, the characteristics of this specific hybridisation between formats will be precisely identified. Finally, the variation in these indicators can provide clues as to the narrative or poetic possibilities that this hybridisation opens up.

5. How to Classify Animated Series?

In examining the extensive corpus of television seriality and the conceptualisation of format and genre within this field, we encounter a distinctive phenomenon: that of animated series. What insights can format and genre theory offer regarding this phenomenon?

In popular literature, there are numerous references to animation that categorise it as a genre or macro-genre of film. However, in more academic literature, a different perspective is presented, which views animation as a technique or even a treatment (Pinel, 2009, p. 27) that imitates the genres and formats of live fiction, which is another form of fiction with flesh-and-blood characters. This can be described as a kind of mimesis of another mimesis, linked to the phenomenon of transcoding, whereby one expressive substance makes use of the resources of another. Despite efforts to impose genre consistency on films that exist solely in the domain of animation, such as silhouette films or pin-screen

films, it is evident that these are merely techniques, rather than genres or formats in themselves. Similarly, when the term 'anime' is employed, it is often used to refer to a style of film-making, although it is also frequently considered to be a genre in its own right.

Carrasco points out that in animated films, "the main formal innovation to be highlighted is the adaptation of the situation comedy into a cartoon (*The Simpsons* -EE. UU.: FOX, desde 1989- o *Family Guy* -EE. UU.: *Fuzzy Dog*-FOX, desde 1999)" (Carrasco Campos, 2010, p. 190), although it is no less true that many other animated series suggest live series formats.

However, there are already narrative genre labels exclusive to the world of animation, such as funny animals (animations of anthropomorphised animals), gross-out shows (animations somewhat based on the stridency of ugliness), object-shows (animations of animated objects), and so on. And certain animations that use the expressive resources of this format have even been defined as animated sitcoms, almost always in a parodic tone towards their referent (the sitcom), from a metadiscursive perspective (Gómez Morales, 2015, pp. 67-83).

Given these concomitances, there is no reason to believe that it is not possible to apply our analytical tool to this type of fiction, as in the case of the procedural and serial already mentioned (Encinas Cantalapiedra & Morgado Gonçalves, 2024). The applicability of the test described above is also possible with regard to item 9, if we force an equivalence, considering that the constructed set could have the same narrative impact as the recurring background, while the background that is only shown once would be the equivalent of the natural location and/or the polyvalent or swing (the set that is used, with slight modifications of the props, to represent unusual spaces).

6. Conclusions

In the available literature, there is no consensus on the definition of genre and format, nor on the nature of the interrelationship between the two. However, we have discovered some regularities and found that it is impossible to subsume one concept within the other or vice versa.

The distinction between two senses of format in the industrial field overcomes misunderstandings and allows us instead to propose an analogy. What we have called "singular format" is a stronger and more detailed notion of what we have called "format as a category of classification". Both terms are used at different moments in audiovisual production and both have in common their emphasis on formal aspects, even if they include some elements of content.

Both senses of the notion of format allow for the same relationship with the notion of genre, with which they do not maintain any kind of incompatibility or redundancy. Format - in both senses - and genre are compatible and complementary concepts.

It seems to be a peaceful solution for the field of television seriality to allow both concepts, format and genre, to coexist, suitably clarified in their differences and similarities, in order to have a terminology that allows us to refer more precisely to the object under study and with an operational taxonomy for both the field of production and that of reception.

Format labels are more precise than genre labels, and although they provide less rich information about content, we should not disregard what they do provide, as they can provide interesting information about the type of world. For example, the procedural series, as the Spider-Man study shows and as other authors generally defend, is a format that tends to preserve the order of the world, to restore the initial order presented by the episode. So although the content is less defined, the dynamics of the world seem clearer. Moreover, these labels allow us to create an effective taxonomic tool to satisfy two needs: 1) to contribute to the understanding in the field of audiovisual production (*inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*) and, between this field and that of reception (criticism and audience); 2) to analyse the influence that some production determinations exert on the plots and poetic possible worlds constituted by audiovisual fiction series.

The taxonomic tool presented here responds directly to the first need: it helps to determine, on the basis of 12 objective parameters, whether a series belongs to one or other of the canonical formats recognised by the industry today. In this sense, it is a disciplinary epistemological contribution. From a theoretical point of view, the tool responds to the second need, since the 12 parameters and their different levels already allow us to speculate on the possibilities and limits of each format when it comes to developing stories and the worlds in which they unfold. However, the tool is intended to be an aid to the development of hermeneutic practices in case studies that allow us to examine in concrete terms the determinants that the choice of format has on the development of the plot, that is, of the stories that

unfold in a specific possible poetic world. This second need implies an interdisciplinary contribution between the field of audiovisual production and the social and human sciences, which are interested in the material and formal, but also social and human, issues recreated in poetic possible worlds.

In animation, there are frequent allusions to live formats, which, in our opinion, shows that a classification of formats equivalent to that of these series can be applied, at least until the animation sector itself configures its own stable and consensual format labels. This is not incompatible with the future development of a more specific analysis model for this type of fiction.

As far as platforms are concerned, apart from the question of periodicity and, in some cases, the loosening of schedules, the other factors are similar to those of traditional television: the same formats are presented on new channels. Television fiction and platform fiction can still talk about formats in very similar terms if we look at the variety of narrative structures in their series. It even happens that platforms have revived some formats that had been in hibernation for decades, such as genre or case series, now renamed anthology series, in their two variants (fixed characters and variable characters).

This paper is part of a larger research project. It takes up the preceding academic discussion on genres and formats and offers theoretical and pragmatic arguments to justify the choices that make up our tool. Our taxonomy of formats identifies the production variables that delimit the possibilities of the possible poetic worlds that each format can present us with. The last step of this article is the first of others already in preparation, which aim to test the tool with different series, even experimental ones, to test the validity of the instrument and, when the time comes, to improve it.

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