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The Aesthetics of the Television Talk Show

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On stage there is a mother and her 17-year-old daughter. Today's problem is mothers who can't stand their children's partners. Mother and daughter tell the studio host about the conflict, and the studio host and the studio audience ask questions and make comments. Finally, the apple of discord – the boyfriend – is let into the studio. There now follows an extremely violent verbal clash between the mother and the boyfriend. They scream and shout at each other, and the studio audience applauds, jeers, and shouts comments. The emotional climax is reached when the tearful daughter declares her love to both mother and boyfriend, and calls upon them to make a reconciliation. The studio host rounds off, and, in a close up shot, she praises the maturity of the daughter to the applause of the studio audience. A commercial break follows.

We are witnessing the American talk show, "Ricki Lake"[1] and the sequence with the mother, daughter, and boyfriend is one of the day's three stories. "Ricki Lake" is a talk show which is specially organised with the aim of capturing a segment of young, female viewers who, in marketing terms, are the most interesting in the American commercially based TV system. The series is a success in the USA, and it has made Ricki Lake one of the most highly paid talk show hosts in American television. The series is also broadcast on a number of TV stations across Europe. In Denmark, at the moment, we can see the series on TV3 and 3+.

As a TV genre, however, the talk show is neither exclusive to the nineties nor to commercial television. In the USA the genre is as old as the medium of television itself, and today, talk shows comprise no small percentage of available programmes on commercial as well as non-commercial TV stations. Talk shows are cheap to produce and popular among viewers, and the ability of this genre to attract viewers is no new phenomenon either. It is, of course, no new phenomenon in Danish public service television either. For example; at the end of the seventies the talk show "Kanal 22" (DR 1979 -82) was able to attract 36% of the population. This type of programme was developed into the series "Lørdagskanalen" -Saturday Channel- (DR 1982 -86) which had a viewer quota of 68% of the population. The programme type survived after the ending of the television monopoly in Denmark, in "Eleva2ren" (TV 2 1988 -96). In spite of viewers having a wider choice of channels, "Eleva2ren" was able to reach average ratings of 27% of the population.

In short, we are apparently dealing with a TV genre which has qualities attractive to viewers. I will offer an explanation of what these qualities are with an angle of approach in audience-oriented critism[2]. The reason why the talk show is a popular form of TV, and

generally becomes so with relative ease, can be explained theoretically by a closer examination of the special relationship that the talk show attempts to create with its viewers. We are, in other words, placed in a special position of experience, which makes the talk show different from other TV genres.

In addition, I will emphasise that the relationship of the genre to the viewers would seem to contain four dramaturgic models in which actual talk shows are staged. Finally, I will return to the subject of "Ricki Lake" and examine how this talk show can be discussed from the theoretical angle of approach to the genre.

Three Fundamental Characteristics

Although it may be difficult at first to see what traits "This is Your Life", "Ricki Lake", and the Danish, "Mors Hammer" (a talk show in which various moral and social issues are discussed) share with each other, the three shows do, in fact, have three elements in common. These are, the TV studio, the host, and the interview.

The TV Studio

In the talk show the TV studio is the space of the programme, and in this genre the unity of time and place are observed in the same way as in classical drama. If the unity is broken, it is only momentary. The role of the TV medium in the talk show is to be both the event *in itself* and to be *the place* of the event at one and the same time.

Consequently, the talk show becomes different from other TV genres, even at this stage. In this genre TV is not a reporting medium, in which the medium primarily tells of a reality outside the medium itself. Neither does it have the role of a transmitting medium in which the medium is a visitor and, in principle, is not responsible for that which is shown. Transmissions of national sporting events and concerts are examples of TV in this role.

The planning of a talk show in terms of time and space has the character of a "now and here" i.e. the aim is first of all to give viewers *an experience of* simultaneity between the time of the programme and its transmission. Secondly, the aim is to create an experience of mergence of space between the programme and the viewers, in such a way that the viewers feel as if they are participants in the programme as opposed to spectators. The scenographic arrangement of the studio is an important element in creating the experience of being a participant. As well as this the studio audience is able to function as a mental bridge between the *place* of the programme and the place of the viewers. The talk show is "now and here", whereas the time and space of TV reporting is "there and then", and the live transmission is "now and there".

The Studio Host

What is offered by the "now and here" of the talk show is a form of togetherness. The studio host is the central dramaturgic element who functions as an intermediary between the programme and the viewers. For this reason, unlike the staging of an anchor person in a news broadcast, the talk show attaches great importance to the television personality of the host, as this is an essential part of the *content* of the talk show. On the other hand the anchor person in a news broadcast is, to a much greater extent, an institutional representative, partly for the TV station, and partly for the phenomenon "news".

The talk show is, to a great extent, the studio host's programme – and the programme is the host's "world". First of all the studio host has a variety of guests, depending on the nature of the programme. The guests are invited on to the host's programme, they are welcomed, and the host expresses his gratitude to them for coming on the show. He also has other guests on the programme, however. They are present, but unseen and silent. These are the viewers. For this reason the talk show is punctuated with many vitally important remarks directly to the camera in which the viewer is addressed directly.

The talk show host is, therefore, performing on two scenes. One of the scenes is in the talk show itself, and the host performs to the participants of the show and the studio audience, if there is one. The other scene exists between the programme and the viewers, such that the viewers are given the impression that the show exists for their benefit. In this way the viewers are recognised as participants in the programme and are addressed as such, as opposed to the position of voyeurs in relation to what is being shown. The position of voyeur is where viewers are generally placed in the TV documentary and in TV fiction.

The Interview

The interview is an important method of creating the content in the talk show. It is also the way in which a great portion of the content of the genre is presented, and consequently the focus is on people and conversation between people. This is what is on offer to the viewers. Because of this focus on people and conversation, the talk show differs from the TV-quiz show and the TV game show in which the emphasis is on a game governed by a set of rules. The talk show is like the performance of a theatrical improvisation, and the way in which this performance is set up with regard to interview style, the role of the interviewer, and the role of the participants, has a vital significance for the viewers' perception of actual talk shows.

The TV studio, the studio host, and the interview are the basic common elements in the various form of talk show. Other elements which are vital in deciding how each talk show is perceived and experienced, are the scenographic set-up, camera techniques, the use of sound and the entire audio-visual dimension. The fact that the talk show can attract viewers when what it has to offer is relatively minimalist, is due to the fact that the talk show embodies basic qualities of the TV medium itself. These features are to a very great degree so apparent, that they are considered natural for both producers of talk shows and viewers alike. That is why they are important.

Uncertainty and Sociability

Two basic qualities of the TV medium are central to the talk show. First of all the mediums ability to broadcast live non-fictive pictures. It is this quality, which separates television from radio and cinema. Secondly, television is mass communication, addressing a mass audience, but it is broadcast directly into the private sphere of the viewer. The medium is a part of our everyday routines, but is a medium primarily used in our leisure time when we want to relax. This means that TV programmes must find a mode of address suitable for a situation which is both collective and individual – a situation which is at once public and private for the home viewer.

In the talk show these two qualities of the TV medium play a vital role resulting in textual features in the genre which I describe with the concepts *the uncertainty factor* and *sociability*.

The Uncertainty Factor

Television was born as a live medium, i.e. there is simultaneity between the spoken statement and its reception, and has its technological origins in radio. Broadcasts were live because in the early childhood of television, facilities for storage and editing were unavailable. If anything other than simultaneous editing was required, recordings were made on film. Not until the end of the 1950s – CBS in 1956 and the BBC in 1958 – was video tape used, (Tusa 1993:11) and in 1959 the ampex video tape recorder was used for the first time in Denmark. In addition moving out of the studio, which Danish radio had begun doing as early as the mid-1930s, proved extremely difficult when applied to television.[3] Although the BBC, as early as 1937, began using the first OB (Outside Broadcasting) unit, and thereby was able to broadcast live from the coronation of King George V1, both TV cameras and recording equipment were heavy and unreliable. For this reason pictures were limited to the area around Westminster Abbey.

If recording equipment were to be moved, it was necessary here too, to record events using film cameras with the consequential time lapse. It was not until the end of the 1970s that ENG (Electronic News Gathering) equipment began to be used in western Europe. (Hjarvard 1995:266)

Because of the technological circumstances, a great many television programmes in the early period were unmarked by the aesthetic norms of the film genre. Instead, television was, in terms of organisation, and to a certain extent aesthetically, considered as a visualisation of radio – radio with pictures. That television could show live pictures, and broadcast these as they happened, was considered the most important aspect of the new medium.

Live broadcasting and the limitations of Outside Broadcasting, combined with the lack of experience of production teams and unreliable technology, meant that programmes were often studio productions full of technical errors. It was impossible to edit out unsuitable remarks or behaviour, as the technology was non-existent. Anecdotes from this early phase are often characterised by an almost Monty Python -like eye for the farcical scenes these production conditions could produce. A good example of this is found in "Chronicle of Denmark", (En *danmarkskrønike*) by the Danish journalist and author Paul Hammerich

> A tour de force was the performance of Aladdin in 1952 with Henning Moritzen in the title role and Helle Virkner as Gulnare. An unintentional dramatic effect was achieved when the genie of the lamp appeared and Aladdin exclaimed: "Oh, how hungry I am, dear spirit! Were you to provide me with a meal, then I would gladly serve you at other time, should you need my help." Then, just as the gastronomic wonder was about to appear, thanks to the magic of the genie, the camera caught a little stage manager crawling across the set with sweat on his brow and wearing a set of earphones. He placed Oehlenschläger's favourite dishes on a silver platter at the feet of the astounded Moritzen. (Hammerich: vol.3 1976: 249)

Television's take-over of many radio programme types and its organisation of transmission areas, combined with conditions of production, has undoubtedly acted as a socialisation factor for viewers and producers alike. "Real" television was live television, and still is for many people today, not just when the broadcast is news, sport or events, but also when it is studio production such as a talk show: that is to say, when topicality is not the reason for broadcasting live. An exemplary expression of this attitude among producers of television is to be found in the article by the Danish journalist

Poul Trier Pedersen in "Levende Billeder" (Live Pictures), 1979 in which he writes the following based on the programme "Kanal 22"

> A television genre had almost been forgotten, at any rate in Denmark, when "Kanal 22" made its appearance on our screens on Monday 5th. February – *the live talk show*. Usually it is the case that a talk show with some degree of topicality, either with or without guests, and broadcast live, is indispensable and included as a matter of course in the repertory of every television company. It is something that just has to be there, to be included without the need for debate (...) Attached to the genre there are qualities which in some way make TV genuine, i.e. television that is *itself* and not merely an imitation of, or a substitute for other media. When a programme in this genre is a success, it contains an excitement factor of "here and now" which is also experienced by the viewers. (Trier Pedersen 1979: 23 and 25)

In spite of the development of technology, some of the qualities of production and the experiences connected with live production are still sought after as a normative point of departure. It is found desirable to maintain these qualities, either in the form of truly live productions, or in the form referred to as "live on tape"[4] .

There would seem to be an overriding reason for maintaining a production form which is live or simulates a live production: *The Uncertainty Factor*, or TV without a safety net, in which one can get close to the qualities in face-to -face interaction of actual reality. The Danish TV producer and author John Carlsen describes the intensity of this adrenalin-producing live form in the following way

> The risk of a planned mini-interview developing into a boring exercise in futility, which you can do nothing to change, is ever-present. And the danger that an actor will freeze, the sound disappear, or that the camera will swing aimlessly around before capturing a picture is always lurking in the background. All these risks, of huge blunders and small cosmetic blemishes, could be removed. So what causes us to choose the live transmission? It is probably the same thing that causes a risk of errors, because the element of unpredictability which is built into the live transmission also creates the opportunity for the unexpected bonus. A participant in a discussion can suddenly get excited and say things that he had really intended to keep quiet about, a member of the audience might actively intervene, or an entertainer might begin to improvise, take over the programme, thereby breaching time limits, plans, and other arrangements. (Carlsen 1984: 120-21)

For John Carlsen, the possibility of the live experience, and thereby the possibility of a completely different experience than the cinema film can offer, is one of the principal reasons why the sequence, the pulse and the rhythm in television are crucial as opposed to the aesthetically perfect. Carlsen compares the possibility to edit television programmes with the effect the talking film had on the aesthetics of film. The heavy, unreliable recording equipment caused a setback in the development of film because it once again took on characteristics belonging to the theatre. For television this

> also meant the edited programme's opportunity for perfection, which in some respects was a step backwards in relation to the live programme's unpredictability, incalculability, and fortuitousness which has a certain amount in common with "life itself". The sequence, by definition the element which carried the live transmission, has to be re-learned in the edited TV programme. (Carlsen 1984:126)

When the sender adheres to an actual or a narrative immediacy in the unit of space of the talk show, it means that this type of programme is situated on a fulcrum with the organised, tried and tested, and predictable on one side, and the uncontrollable on the other. The interaction is not scripted exactly (as opposed to theatre drama in which we are dealing with a fictive universe) and the chance of something going wrong, or taking an unexpected turn is always present. It is this degree of unpredictability which might conceivably be one of the talk show's strong points in relation to viewers. This also applies to the live on tape form, where editing opportunities are limited, and the experience of unity in time and place can thereby be achieved. Re-taking all, or part, of an interview is a difficult task because the changes have to be contextualised into a unit, and at the same time the "nerve" of the live transmission has to be maintained for participants, host and audience alike.

In addition to this, real simultaneity can be utilised so that contact with viewers becomes an element in the programme by using different kind of phone-ins. This can, for example, be in the form of questions to the guest of a show from viewers, or in the form of a quiz in which viewers participate by phone. Thus the show depends on there being an empirical receiver in order to exist at all, but this also functions as a part of the unity of the programme for those viewers who do not participate directly, and is perhaps a decisive factor in the appeal of the genre.

Sociability

Immediacy as a priority in the production of the talk show, and the experiential qualities sought through it, for both the sender and receiver, should be seen in the context of the "here" which is created by the scenic character of the programme type. The programme type attempts to deny, with every means at its disposal, that television is dominated by one-way communication. Only in short sequences, and with a limited number of selected viewers, can television actually be two-way communication in which it is possible for a receiver to answer. The fact that this insistence of contact is such an emphatic trait of television is not merely the result of commercial TV's anxiety about ratings, but is also, to a great extent, connected with the user situation that television is a part of. The reception of the TV mass medium takes place predominantly in the viewers' private sphere, and what TV has to offer is a part of everyday life. Television is still, however, the leisure medium unlike radio which is increasingly becoming the medium of non-leisure time. Radio is heard as an accompaniment to work and in transition periods between work and leisure time. Radio "keeps the beat" in the part of our lives which is governed by the clock (Dahl 1991:13). The cross-field between public/ formal and private/ informal is, therefore, the basic communicative "area" of television. The many anonymous receivers must be "talked" to, but in the private surroundings and individual life of each.[5] This has consequences for the mode of address and the structure of broadcasting, which influences TV generally, and the talk show in particular.

John Ellis' analysis (Ellis 1982) of the aesthetic form of television relative to that of cinema film is still the most extensive bid at a maximal description of the communicative characteristics of television in relation to the user situation. Ellis emphasises that the combination of reception situation, screen format, the audio-visual factors, and the daily presence of television, give it, its programmes and its personalities the tinge of everyday familiarity and intimacy which radio to a certain extent also achieved with the auditory form alone. Finding a form of communication which suits the cross-field between pub-

lic/ formal and private/ informal is an art which was not automatically mastered when television was born. It takes time to assimilate the legacy of other media forms as the British media researcher Paddy Scannell has shown in his examination of the historical changes in what he calls the BBC's "communicative ethos". In his micro-sociological, Goffman- inspired angle of approach to the analysis of media products, Scannell emphasises that awareness of the fact that the sender has no control over the reception situation, which takes place in the receiver's private sphere, is increasingly evident in televisions mode of address in general. Intimacy, both in expression and content, the person-orientated, the schematised structure, and the focus on contact, should be seen as the sender's attempt to motivate an interest on the part of the receiver by talking to him in a form that reflects reception in his private sphere and in everyday domestic situations. As an example Scannell uses the BBC's Talks Department which recognised this at an early stage.

> Quite quickly, older public models of speaking (the lecture, the sermon, the political speech) were rejected and replaced by more direct, intimate, personal styles of speech (Matheson 1933). In short, broadcasting learnt that its expressive idioms must, in form of content, approximate to the norms of ordinary, everyday, mundane conversations, or talk. In talk-as-conversation participants treat each other as particular persons, not as collective. So too with broadcasting. The hearable and seeable effect of radio and television is that, "I am addressed". (Scannell 1995: 10)

In the book, *Radio, Television and Modern Life* (Scannell 1996:28) Scannell distinguishes between two form of contact-making which can be recognised in the talk show. According to Scannell these two forms could be observed as early as the 1930s in radio, and he uses two forms of entertainment programmes as analytical examples:

- In the first type the receiver is "invited in" to a studio which is the place of the event. Here the studio audience plays a crucial role as a stand-in for the absent audience who are at home. This is an attempt to establish the "invited in" element. The function of the studio audience, along with the host is to convey an experience of togetherness which includes the receiver.
- In the second type the studio audience is absent. With the help of the TV host's verbal, and in the case of television, audio-visual planning, the receiver is addressed in his private sphere by a process in which the programme simulates a private sphere, thereby seeking to give an experience of spacial simultaneity between sender and receiver.

> The classic entertainment programme, from this period, which deliberately sought to enter into the "fireside world" of listeners, and to invoke "the pleasures of privacy" was "Monday Night at Seven." (Scannell: 1996:28)

According to Scannell, it is the contact itself between programme and listener which is the dominating feature in the content of these programmes. Here he uses the term *sociability* to describe intimacy-creating mode of address, and atmosphere of togetherness sought by both types of programme. The German sociologist Georg Simmel describes the phenomenon sociability as "a special sociological structure" that is a significant trait of living in society in general. It is based on people's need to join together with other people for the sake of unity itself. (Simmel 1910:128) Sociability in its narrower sense –

being together with others as an activity in itself- emphasises form as opposed to content. Sociability, according to Simmel, is "the play form of association. It is related to the content- determined concreteness of association as art is related to reality." (Simmel 1910:130) Thus, sociability is almost a ritual activity, has no aim apart from its own being, and is, at the same time, "oriented completely about personalities." (Simmel 1910: 130) Sociability is created by personalities, which means that sociability emphasises human qualities.

There are, however, limits to the kind of human qualities allowed. In order to establish and maintain sociability it is necessary for participants to restrain certain aspects of their individuality. If too much emphasis is put on individuality the experience of sociability will disappear.

> The most personal things – character, mood, and fate – have thus no place in it. It is tactless to bring in personal humor, good or ill, excitement and depression, the light and shadow of one's inner life. (Simmell 1910:131)

This means that personality must be exhibited, but not private, personal things which can form the basis of strong emotional outbursts and serious confrontations, among other things.

Paddy Scannell considers sociability as a trait which is, or ought to be, common in the mode of address in the electronic media across the more manifest content, such as the wish to inform or convince. In the talk show the spacial insistence of a collective "here" – a virtual meeting place – combined with the talk show's actual or narrative "now", or immediacy, means that sociability is at the centre of the communicative relationship between the programme and the viewer. The roles and expectations associated with sociability are an indispensable part of the talk show's substance. Individual programmes can, however, be produced with varying degrees of emphasis on sociability. The use of the studio audience is the decisive, definitive factor. By involving the studio audience in the production, sociability is emphasised as a dimension of the programme's contents. Irrespective of the degree to which sociability is emphasised as a dimension of the contents, there will be consequences for the way in which communication takes place in the programme type, and what is possible in terms of contents, if sociability as a factor is to be maintained.

In the essay "Hosts and Guests", (Arlen 1997) the American author Michael J. Arlen focuses on a particular form of role play which is characteristic of American television and the talk show in particular. He characterises the interaction between TV hosts, guests and viewers, with a point of entry in the original Latin root *hospes* in the notion "hospitality", which contains an ambiguity of status in the term used for host, guest and strangers alike. Every instance of participant interaction has a double status of both host and guest, which Arlen illustrates with an example from "The Barbera Walters Special," in which she visits a number of celebrities in their homes. This gives rise to a certain amount of turbulence in their roles and thereby making them more apparent.

> (...) the programme opened with Ms. Walters standing in her New York apartment, all dressed up to receive company in the accepted manner of a television hostess, but informing us that she was going to take us *out*, so to speak, "into the private homes and private thoughts of two couples." Then the Streisand-Peterses were shown acting as hosts to Ms. Walters. Then, there was an intermission of shots, during which Ms. Walters – transported back to her apartment and her original hostess role – proceeded

> to take us, as her guests, on a tour of her various art objects and souvenirs. Then, we were off to Georgia, where the Carters were clearly now the hosts and took Ms. Walters through *their* house. In conclusion we returned to New York with Ms. Walters, who signed off by saying, "I'm so pleased you could join us in your homes. Good evening from mine." (Arlen 1997:309)

Arlen considers the host-guest dramaturgy in the talk show as a ritualised acting out of the hospitality that comprises a significant part of conversational structure of this type of programme. (Arlen 1977:310) The talk show must act out hospitality as a ritual in order to relieve or avert the hostility that viewers might have by being "invaded" by strangers in their private sphere. In other words the programme type is subject to certain communicative norms that exist in social, informal, face-to-face forms of interaction between people who do not know each other very well. In connection with this one might expect that in the talk show rules of politeness (Argyle & Henderson 1985, Drotner et al 1996)[6] and the handling of others' "face" (Drotner et al 1996, Goffman 1967)[7] become particularly important, because they have influence on the interaction in the programme type and how the programme type is experienced "behind the back" of what is probably a more explicit aim of the communication.

Dramatic Excitement

The two dimensions – the uncertainty factor and sociability – mean that the unpredictable and the unplanned, become important in the talk show, and it means that form, rules of politeness, and the treatment of others' "face", become extremely important in the talk show. Both dimensions are essential *elements of content* in the genre. For that reason they are present no matter what the more manifest content of the show might be, e.g. a discussion of Danes' attitude to immigrants and refugees, or people's experiences of taboo subjects from the private sphere.

At the same time, however, the elements of uncertainty and sociability are incompatible qualities, and because of this a form of tension exists between the two dimensions in the genre. This tension exists between the tendency towards chaos, danger, unpleasantness, and loss of face found in the uncertainty factor, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the tendency towards impeccability, politeness, and pleasure of sociability. How this tension is administered depends on the actual use of the genre. In addition, the way in which this tension is administered by the individual programme will have experiential consequences for the viewers. Here one might expect too, that what constitutes the experience of uncertainty and sociability in actual programmes depends very much on who the viewers are. This means, for example, that if one wishes to produce a talk show directed towards young people, the production of the two dimensions must be thought out in relation to this specific target group. Therefore, the estimation of the individual talk show's degree of success and the experiential consequences of the viewers is inseparable from considerations of whom the show is directed at.

Because of the accentuated textual features of the talk show, I believe that there is reason to consider the talk show as experientially different from other types of television programme. The talk show can be expected, theoretically, to be "closer" to the interactional and behavioural framework which is characteristic of informal face-to-face communication.

Anthropologist, Donald Horton, and sociologist, R. Richard Wohl, have defined the special communicative relationship between the programme type and its viewers as para-social interaction. (Horton & Wohl 1956.) It is precisely the non-fictive TV-personalities ("personae" Horton & Wohl 1956:216) who are focused on, whose existence, "is a function of the media themselves." (Horton & Wohl 1956:216) Their ideas are based on the assumption that the viewers' relationship to these personae, who act as both hosts and interviewers, can be described as a para-social relationship. According to the authors the relationship differs in *degree* but not in *type* from genuine personal relationships between people. It is the degree of reciprocity which is the decisive factor, but, on the other hand it gives the viewer the freedom to withdraw, to experience from a distance, and not to get involved, which face to face situations of this nature would otherwise render impossible. An important factor in establishing the para-social relationship is the stability of the TV personality. Depending on how often the actual programmes are broadcast, these programmes can offer weekly, or often daily, "meetings" at an appointed time which can be integrated into the routines of daily life. In addition these programmes are to a great extent, representatives of security in a world which is insecure

> unlike real associates, he has the particular virtue of being standardized according to the "formula" for his character and performance which he and his managers have worked out and embodied in an appropriate "production format" (...) The persona is ordinarily predictable, and gives his adherents no unpleasant surprises. (Horton & Wohl 1956:217)

Horton and Wohl describe, in addition, how the illusion of intimacy and participation is created in the talk show by means of four central devices:

1. The host duplicates the gestures of informal interaction, conversational style, and milieu.
2. The host attempts, verbally, to give the impression of camaraderie and personal knowledge of the production team, who are addressed and brought into the programme.
3. The host moves physically among the studio audience, and for short periods he can become a spectator to the performance of others, along with the studio audience.
4. Focus is put on the hosts method of communication, i.e. the medium itself and its technology.

The conclusion of Horton and Wohl is that stability and these four devices help to create and emphasise the main values of the programme type in relation to the viewers. These values are predominantly orientated around how this form of togetherness is characterised by sociability, courtesy, friendship and close contact. However, unlike theatre drama in which secondary identification is probably a relevant feature in the way the audience relates to what is shown, Horton and Wohl emphasise that the situation is different in personality-centred programmes

> The "personality program", unlike the theatrical drama, does not demand or even permit the esthetic illusion – that loss of situational reference and self-consciousness in which the audience not only accepts the symbol as reality, but fully assimilates the symbolic role. (Horton & Wohl 1956: 218)

The role of the viewer in these programmes is fundamentally different and the psychological attitude must generally be assumed to be different too.

> When the persona appears alone, in apparent face-to-face interaction with the home viewer, the latter is still more likely to maintain his own identity without interruption, for he is called upon to make appropriate responses which are complementary to those of the persona. This "answering" role is, to a degree, voluntary and independent. (Horton & Wohl 1956: 219)

Horton and Wohl consider viewers to be extremely competent players who have no difficulty in separating the various forms of symbolic universes from actual reality. Furthermore the authors are particularly cautious in drawing conclusions of a socio-psychological and societal nature. This caution cannot be said to characterise Carsten Y. Hansen's use of the theory. In his article from 1988 he uses the theory as the basis in examining the talk show in Danish public service television. The article points out that the talk show is the form of non-fictive television entertainment which began to appear on the Danish state television service, "DR" at the end of the 1980s. On the basis of a comparison of a number of Saturday entertainment programmes, Hansen draws conclusions which are far more radical with regard to the dangers of the para-social for viewers en masse

> It is the everyday, person-to-person conversation [which] makes these programmes popular because they fulfil one of the most important viewer needs of entertainment television: to purvey material to the para-social interaction process with which viewers substitute actual interpersonal relationships. (Hansen 1988:102)

Horton and Wohl, on the other hand, consider the para-social as a *supplement*, and only in the case of individuals who are already socially and psychologically isolated can it develop into a substitute for self-created relationships in reality. And only if the para-social in *these cases* becomes a substitute can it be considered pathological. Hansen concentrates exclusively on the part of the argumentation concerning the para-social theory of interaction, in which the general validity of the principles are illustrated with the support of extreme, and possibly pathological cases.

Four Dramaturgic Models

It is within the area of tension between the uncertainty factor and sociability, that the dramaturgic arrangement of the talk show would seem to revolve. The emphasis in the individual programme can therefore be placed differently in relation to the two dimensions, or each element can be given equal priority.

In my work with the talk show I have contrived four prototypical models of how the tension between the uncertainty factor and sociability is arranged. I have termed the four dramaturgic models the *Debate*, the *Research*, the *Therapy*, and the *Consultation*[8]. Each of these elements gives a particular type of progression in the programme as a whole, or in sections of the programme, and they give differing roles to the host and participants. Differences and similarities can be illustrated thus:

Figure 1. *Four Dramaturgic Models*

Dramaturgic model	Debate	Research	Therapy	Consultation
Course of the programme	The possibility to take sides	Process of exposing different aspects/narratives	Insight making the personal narrative public	Solving a problem by giving advice
Host:	Provocateur & moderator	Involved & hero	Therapist and friend	Adviser and friend
Participant(s) 2 or more	Conflict and confrontation between positions	Different aspects	Different aspects	People with problems and co-advisers
1	Party in the case	A riddle to be solved	Narrator with a special story	Representative of the problem

It is therefore a question of how the individual model prioritises and arranges the chaos potential and the danger to sociability contained in the uncertainty factor. All four models have a potential for chaos, but it is especially prominent in the Debate, the Therapy, and in the Consultation. I will briefly describe the various characteristics of the individual models.

The course of the programme: The Debate model is characterised by a course of the programme that will focus on the possibility to form an opinion. The Research will, on the other hand, focus on the process of discussing in itself, and getting as many aspects/ narratives as possible brought into the discussion in order to shed light on as many dimensions of an issue, or a person, as possible. The Therapy will aim for insight by making the personal narrative public, and finally, the Consultation will aim to solve a problem by giving advice.

The role or function of the host: In the Debate the role of the host is to be a provocator, but also the moderator. In the Research the host's role is to be personally involved, and the role is similar to the role of the hero in the fairy-tale. The host has to use all his/her personal and professional skills to get a topic or a guest's personality described.

In the Therapy the host is staged in the role of something in between a therapist and a close friend. And in the Consultation the host's role is, again, something in between an adviser and a best friend.

The role of the participant or the participants: In the Debate you can either have two or more participants and they will then be cast as opponents and confronted in the show. If there is only one participant/ guest in the show, the host will act as the opponent, and this kind of model is rare in the talk show, because the host will have to be unpleasant towards his or her guest. It can be done, but the examples show that it takes a special kind of host, and the sympathy of the viewers will very easily turn in favour of the guest, who has been invited. The only exception is politicians, who are professionals, and therefore we do not feel sorry for them so easily!

In the Research, participants represent different aspects of a problem discussed. And with one participant the guest will be the riddle the host has to solve using all his or her skills. In the Therapy, participants have the same role as in the research, and if there is only one participant he or she is cast as narrator with a special story to tell. In the Con-

sultation, the participants are a mix of people with problems and co-advisers. If there is only one participant, he or she is cast as a representative of the problem.

As it can be imagined the Debate, the Therapy and the Consultation are dramaturgic models where the uncertainty factor has high priority, and these models will often go to the limits of sociability and beyond! In the Debate, the temperaments of the participants and the conflict between positions in the debate can boil over – even the host can get aggressive towards his or her guests.

In the Therapy and the Consultation the problems, the stories told, and the emotional disclosures, can result in emotional breakdowns by the participants and even the host. The Research is the most harmless, and this model is the dominating model in late-night talk shows with famous guests, and in breakfast television – at least in Denmark.

"Ricki Lake"

"Ricki Lake" is an example of a use of the talk show genre in which a mix between the Debate, the Therapy, and the Consultation has been chosen. At the same time the chaos potential of the uncertainty factor in both dramaturgic models is prioritised equally. For that reason we get a programme in which it is desirable that the participants e.g. burst into tears or break down, and in which it is desirable for the participants to get involved in violent verbal, and sometimes physical, confrontations. In other words, it is intended that private lives are exhibited in "Ricki Lake" and so, sociability is intended to go to its limits, touching on whatever kinds of personal details it can.

However, in spite of the emphasis on confrontations and emotional outburst, sociability still plays a significant role in this series. It is through sociability that consensus is reached in the debate, and the "therapy" succeeds. First of all, the studio host is never challenged and is never part of the conflict. Secondly, each programme in the series has *reconciliation* as its aim. In many programmes this happens by means of a re-assertion of the positive, almost mythological status of the family. As with the description of the mother, daughter and boyfriend at the beginning of this article, all the other programmes in the series are brim-full with stories of moral guidance. The result then is usually that the solution to all manner of problems is to be found in traditional (nuclear) family values.

Along with the talk show's fundamental efforts to create "here and now" experiences and an experience of togetherness and community among people, the set of values in the series might also be part of the explanation as to the popularity of the programme. The viewers witness a discussion of a number of serious emotional, and common human problems, and at the same time they are presented with a solution to them.

There is no doubt that "Ricki Lake" is an example of the effective use of the genre characteristics of the talk show, but the effectiveness with which emotional and other human problems are dealt with, is open to debate. The talk show is not a fictive genre, although as in all forms of television of course, there is a high level of construction. The fact that we are dealing with factual television is significant not only for those who appear in the series, but also for those who watch it. As fiction the programme would be unable to survive.

An important question which can be directed towards the series concerns the possible consequences that exceeding the limits of sociability might have. Is the effect that the programme contributes to creating social dissociation and hardening of attitudes, or does it on the other hand encourage empathy and tolerance i.e. diametrically opposed

values? Are the participants in the show exploited in a host-centred freak show that offers five minutes of fame to anonymous ordinary people? Or is the series, on the other hand, one in which the problems of ordinary people are taken seriously and in which the personality of the host is the driving force ? And does the programme provide a public forum in which these problems can be thematised and discussed?

It is important to emphasise that "Ricki Lake" represents only one of various ways in which the talk show genre can be used. It is therefore a good idea in discussing the talk show, to differentiate between the genre and the *use* of the genre in actual programmes. This could also be a point of departure for criticism, in which, one can, with relevance, begin to examine the nature of the uncertainty factor and sociability, and what the experiential consequences might be for the viewer. Such an approach would also mean that it is not the talk show genre itself which is the object of criticism, but rather how different TV stations put the genre to use. As it has been my intention to emphasise in this article, the talk show is popular among viewers because it is a genre based on fundamental qualities of the TV medium; a medium that is an important cultural and political forum in contemporary daily life.

Notes

1. The sequence is from a "Ricki Lake" programme broadcast on Channel 4 on 30.3.1995.
2. The articles theoretical angle of entry and points of view are based on my Ph.D. thesis on the TV talk show and the use of the genre in Danish public service TV. H. Bruun *Snakkeprogrammet. Portræt af en TV-genre*. (The Talk Show. Portrait of a TV genre) Århus 1997. In the thesis I discuss, among other things, the sparse theoretical literature on the genre. The boundaries of this article, however, do not allow for a more protracted argumentation of my theoretical angle of entry. The thesis focuses on the talk show in Danish public service TV and contains five analyses of Danish talk shows: viz. "Kanal 22", "Lørdagskanalen", "Eleva2ren", "Damernes Magasin", and "Højlunds Forsamlingshus".
3. In 1934 the so-called mahogany cart was used for the first time. It was a mobile recording unit which connected a microphone to two lacquer-plate sound- recording machines, each of which could record approx. three minutes of sound. This technical development had a great influence on radio's aesthetic and linguistic development. See Bondebjerg 1990:22 for a detailed description.
4. Live on tape – also called delayed live, is a production form in which the producers attempt to re-create the live element by simulating a live recording. It involves a chronological and continuous recording which, when finished, is edited only marginally. The main emphasis in production lies in the pre-production process, i.e. concept development, research and briefing. As a rule the recording is made one or two days before the date of transmission, which means that if anything goes wrong with the recording itself it must be transmitted in any case. There is no time to make a new programme even if it is not a success. According to the Danish TV journalist Michael Meyerheim who was host of TV 2's talk show "Meyerheim at Eight" for a number of years, this is exactly what happened when a well-known politician was to guest one of the programmes. In the research phase NN had been amusing, talkative and courteous. It seemed certain that the politician in question would "deliver the goods" When it came time to record, however, NN, for reasons unknown, closed up like an oyster. He answered in monosyllables, and the prepared jokes seemed lost on him. Meyerheim described this this show as one of the longest in his career as a talk show host! (Source: own interview with Michael Meyerheim 16.5. 1994.
5. The realization of teleision as a much more individualized medium which the fusion of the computer, telephony, and TV makes possible is still some time away. It is also open to debate whether a technological possibility will, in reality, change our conception of the TV- medium and the way in which we use it, in a short space of time. There is, perhaps, good reason for skepticism as, apart from the financial outlay necessary on the part of users, this involves an adjustment in the habits and expectations to the TV-medium on the part of the individual. That expectations to the medium are surrounded by a certain tardiness is shown by the fact that the "live" production form as used in the talk show, for example, is still maintained in spite of its being made unnecessary because of technological advances.
6. Drotner et al, p.148 gives an account of the communicative principle of politeness which is presented by philologists as a supplement to Grice's principle of effectivity. According to Drotner et al the principle of

politeness can be put into practice in five communicative rules of politeness. These were presented thus by John E. Andersen (1989): 1: Be considerate to others and avoid being troublesome to others. 2: Be generous in fulfilling the wishes of others. 3: Be positive. Avoid criticising or expressing dissatisfaction with your partner in conversation. 4: Be modest. Avoid praising yourself. Be self-critical -and 5: Agree. Seek the greatest possible area of agreement, e.g. by declaring yourself to be in partial agreement although you totally disagree.

7. Goffman's "face" concept is based on the notion of how we all – individually and in co-operation with each other – attempt to preserve our subjective and socially-created self-image. This image of self is bound together with our self-esteem and thereby our dignity and honour. Loss of face is, therefore, extremely dangerous for the individual, and one tries in many different ways to avoid this e.g. by being polite and tactful when dealing with other people's "face" in order to avoid their attacking one's own. In addition, we often attempt to help each other through situations which could give rise to loss of face. If, in spite of these attempts, the situation occurs anyway, one can attempt to "pay back" so that face is re-gained by the loss of someone else's. Drotner et al (1996:113) gives an account of the linguistic ritual into which the re-gaining of face can be divided in an interaction, if the situation has been accidental. Thus: 1: challenge – the break takes place and is recognised. 2: Sacrifice: atonement, apology and punishment. 3: Acceptance: the offender is forgiven and 4. Thanksgiving: the healing of the break.
8. The terms debate and therapy are borrowed from Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt. In their extensive reception research they examine the type of talk shows which they term, "Audience discussion programmes" in the book *Talk on Television – Audience Participation and Public Debate,* 1994. In the study the authors concentrate exclusively on talk shows that resemble Ricki Lake. It is however primarily British programmes whose reception they investigate.

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