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# Staking Claims: Conveying Transnational Cultural Value in a Creative Industry

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## Abstract

This study examines who speaks to cultural value in the world market for television, what criteria are invoked for product appraisal, and how aesthetic criteria are deployed to explore the ways in which cultural arbiters and critical appraisal contribute to transnational culture worlds. Findings reveal that product appraisals consist of rational, concrete criteria that signal profitability alongside aesthetic criteria that reflect dimensions of entertainment. In the absence of professional critics, the public discourse of industry boundary spanners proved crucial to marketplace gatekeeping and the organization of global television's market environment.

## Keywords

television, globalization, critics

Criticism is crucial to cultural valuation of artistic work in elite art worlds because it plays a pivotal role in legitimizing which works deserve public attention and aesthetic praise. Although critical appraisal is central to nonelite art worlds as well, in these contexts, criticism is complicated by overtly commercial considerations, audience expertise, and the need to find a balance between art and entertainment. Further complicating the task of criticism in industrial and other nonelite contexts is that additional participants, such as cultural ministries, exhibition juries, and booking agents, who, by virtue of their intermediary role in the distributive process, act as gatekeepers who filter products for adoption on the basis of critical assessment, narrowing the range of products available to audiences.

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Scholarship on the contribution of critical appraisal to art worlds focuses on contexts that share locales and conventions, factors that contribute in important ways to the internal coherence of these worlds. However, art worlds are also transnational, and in light of the upsurge in cultural globalization in cultural industries (Crane & Janssen, 2008), a question remains regarding how the role of critical appraisal is affected by art worlds that are multinational in scope. Cultural globalization, which Crane (2002) defines as “the transmission or diffusion across national borders of various forms of media and the arts” (p. 1), can be expected to complicate the social organization of creative practices in art worlds and, in particular, the ways in which those with critical authority contribute to these contexts. Griswold’s (2000) research on the malleability of production in the Nigerian fiction complex, variation in cross-national literary interpretation (Griswold, 1987), and the transformation of the Nigerian romance novel as a cultural object (Griswold & Bastian, 1987) suggests as much and points to how transnational interchange affects creative systems. Still, less is understood about the role of designated experts and the contribution of their expertise to art worlds that conduct exchange in the context of cultural globalization.

Relying on the world market of television industry import and export as a case study, the research reported here examines the contribution of critical assessment to transnationalized culture industries. The concept of culture world was devised by Crane (1992) to account for the institutional complexity of these industries and to recognize their myriad participants, such as policy makers who determine availability of content or products from particular sources and audiences whose taste preferences influence producers and shape product trends. To explore how critical appraisal contributes to globalized worlds of culture industries, the study presented here focuses, in particular, on the contribution of cultural arbiters to the world market for television. Given the complexity cultural globalization brings to art worlds, it is anticipated that critical appraisal prevails in nonelite culture worlds but in ways that are more complicated than in elite contexts and that call for an expanded understanding of how evaluation contributes to cultural systems.

## **The Global Television Marketplace**

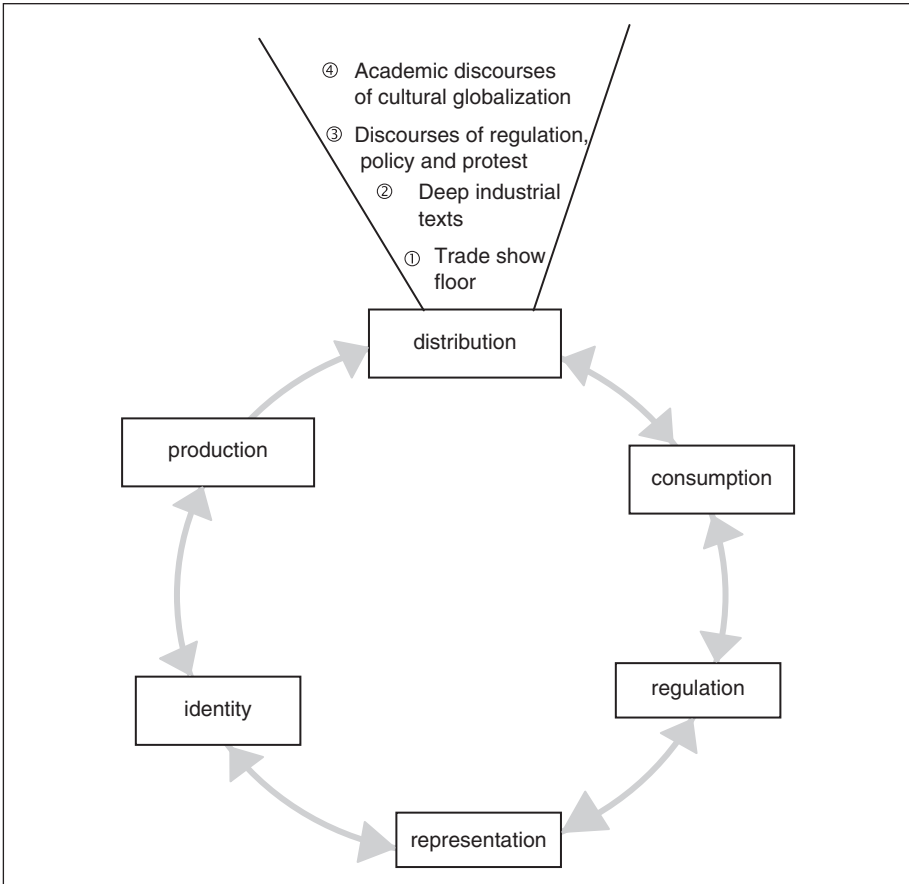
Since its inception, the marketing environment for television distribution has been regarded as chaotic, with little that can reliably account for why programs export one year to a particular locale or region and not the next (Cantor & Cantor, 1986). Although there are many reasons for this unpredictability, chief among them are the market’s wide range of nation-specific origins and development, government regulation, and ever-transforming audience tastes (D. D. Bielby & Harrington, 2008).<sup>1</sup> Adding to the complexity of this marketing environment is that from its outset, the world market for television has lacked an overarching bureaucratic structure implemented by any one government, individual, or group. Although particular nations may dominate trade with other nations or regions of the globe for varying lengths of time, since its launching in the early 1950s, television’s world marketplace has been composed of many hundreds

of production companies—from small, one-person operations to large, multidivisional entities—any one of which is just as likely to be the source of a creative idea that could become the next global hit or a successful scheduling solution (Brennan, 2007b).<sup>2</sup> Thus, a vital and equally important place remains for all industry participants, regardless of firm size, rendering culture world boundaries fluid and inexact.

In the absence of a unifying bureaucratic structure, the world market for television programs is facilitated by four major television conventions sponsored each year by industry trade associations. These associations are the U.S.-based National Association of Television Program Executives, which holds its NATPE event every winter; France's Reed Midem Organization, which convenes its MIPCOM and MIP-TV trade fairs in the fall and spring, respectively; and the collaborative venture of Hollywood's major studios and producers, the Los Angeles (LA) Screenings, which schedules its by-invitation-only event in late spring.<sup>3</sup> Attendance at these major international crossroads for buyers and sellers of television programming can number in the tens of thousands, drawing participants from every region of the globe. As key sites where all-important face-to-face interaction takes place, these conventions anchor the process whereby industry participants learn about the latest program concepts, successes, and failures; seek clarification about products under consideration; and negotiate transactions.

As organizational entities, trade associations are recognized for their role in the infusion of meaning into economic action (Spillman, 2009), and in lieu of a unifying bureaucratic structure in the world market for television, industry "buzz" (Havens, 2006) or gossip plays a crucial role in cementing business relationships, aligning perceptions about products, and publicizing sales. However, as an essential element in the operation of this marketplace, the contribution of industry word of mouth goes well beyond the all-important function of on-the-ground gossip and becomes, through the actions taken on it by industry participants, an aspect of an institutionally significant discursive structure—one that effectively unites all participants within a complex market environment that would otherwise appear to consist of little more than many seemingly disconnected institutional layers, entities, actions, and individuals (D. D. Bielby & Harrington, 2008). Discourse within this context occurs less in terms of a one-way flow from producer (seller) to consumer (buyer) and more in terms of a dialogue, that is, as an ongoing process. Because industry transactions among participants occur at different locations and times and in varying sequences throughout the marketplace, and they circulate through a complex set of reciprocal processes and practices, sites occupied by those in ancillary or even subordinate positions, such as advertisers or ratings companies, may provide important intermediary functions in the discursive circuit. Figure 1 represents the overall framework of this discursive structure, including the contribution of academic discourse to it.

At its most general level, industry discourse is about products, and it encompasses the range of efforts by distributors to build interest and excitement around their programs. Business-related word of mouth circulates year-round, but it becomes more intense and concentrated in the "incestuous environment of global television fairs" (Havens, 2003, p. 28). When discussing the importance of buzz, or hype, Havens



**Figure 1.** Discourses of distribution

focused his attention on its contribution to achieving product differentiation—branding—by sellers. Buzz achieves this goal in many ways, and it sets the stage for more concrete activity when a program becomes successful—promotional efforts that include interviews with program cast members, tailor-made program marketing for broadcasters, and access to production sites by media journalists.<sup>4</sup> However, such discourse is important to this industry in ways other than branding because, among other things, it is instrumental to the discovery and launch of new products. Indeed, the scheduling of the four international conventions, described above, is accompanied by an annual cycle of discourse that consists of *stages* through which word of mouth builds.<sup>5</sup> The LA Screenings, for example, which promote for international buyers the U.S. networks' selections for their fall schedules, have emerged as an important first stage in this process. As veteran industry journalist Steve Brennan (2006a) has observed,

the screenings serve as the *first venue* [emphasis added] at which TV buyers from around the world get an opportunity to see and compare notes on new shows, and inevitably the market creates a *buzz* [emphasis added] about programs that promise to become big sellers. (p. L-2)

Industry talk is important in at least one other way for the purposes of the research reported here. Such discourse is important in the global marketplace because buyers and sellers, as key participants in the discursive circuit of industry word of mouth, function as surrogates for the audience, with buyers deriving their authority much as book reviewers do, that is, as knowledgeable interpreters of the tastes of viewers whom sellers must reach. Thus, although it may appear that international program sales from one country to another are built on business transactions structured by contracts in seemingly straightforward ways, in fact, the nature and substance of the interaction between buyers and sellers in the global marketplace is far more complex, because they are trading in the exchange of cultural products whose value goes beyond the mere economic to users. Television series are expected to function as culturally resonant entertainment, and their content has to comport with local audience tastes, regulations, and standards. To that end, television's aesthetic properties, and the elements of individual series, have to be represented and conveyed in ways that signal appropriateness at the local level (D. D. Bielby & Harrington, 2002).

Hirsch's (1972, 2000) seminal work on culture industries, which pointed to the functional importance of the actions of boundary spanners to rendering culture industries as operable systems, suggests how agreement about cultural suitability of products is achieved in contexts such as the global television market. As individuals who, by virtue of their structural location (e.g., scouts in search of talent and programming), are able to see beyond the immediate horizon of a business environment, boundary spanners also contribute an important gatekeeping function that brokers and interprets as well as selects and promotes. Acting in their role as industry filters, boundary spanners associated with cultural industry systems rely on various strategies to reduce uncertainty about future product success, chief among them being dependence on trusted suppliers and reliance on appraisal criteria that signal suitability and even delegation of decision making to programming specialists. Pivotal to the success of these strategies is their reliance on a shared social network in which members, their reputations, and their products are known (Kawashima, 1999).

Compared to gatekeeping in relatively circumscribed art worlds, the social networks that make up transnational culture worlds are more complex. In television's global market, member nations come and go, participating industries change from year to year, and ever-shifting program needs prevail. Consequently, social networks in this culture world can be expected to be less stable, and they must be augmented if not replaced altogether by equally viable alternatives. Within this context, industry discourse, because of its established pervasiveness and centrality to the world market, becomes a pivotal integrative mechanism by which critical appraisal is conducted, with the industry trade press as the principal venue for its transmission. By way of example, now that the once

insular domestic U.S. market has opened up to the idea of importing program formats, its industry now explicitly celebrates network executives for actions taken to foster the transatlantic format business (Guider, 2007; Guider & Turner, 2007; see also Hirschberg, 2005). On its face, this coverage affirms the United States' receptivity to concepts that originate beyond its borders, but more relevant to our purposes here is that it demonstrates the importance of the integrative function of public discourse in this market environment, which renders participants' actions visible, meaningful, and significant to the organization of the industry. To more fully explore the ways in which cultural arbiters and critical appraisal contribute to the discursive structure of transnational culture worlds, the research reported here asked three questions: *Who speaks* to the assessing of cultural value in the world market for television? What criteria are invoked for *product appraisal*? How are aesthetic criteria *deployed* in this context?

## Analysis

The present research draws on industry coverage of the international market for television published in the *Hollywood Reporter* between January 2004 and January 2009, a period that coincides with increasing formalization of this market. Following the vigorous expansion of the global market in the 1990s, the vitality of this marketplace turned downward after the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and abroad and the collapse of the technology sector. Reduced corporate spending and increased concerns for national security followed, dampening its steady growth, but by 2004, that trend had reversed, attendance at international trade conventions had rebounded, and the market was once again robust.<sup>6</sup>

Of the two leading industry publications, *Daily Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter*, the latter is more extensive in its coverage of developments in the television industry. The *Hollywood Reporter* publishes weekday print and online editions (except holidays) and a weekly international print-only edition that repackages and augments the week's international news. The daily print and online editions and the weekly international edition of the *Hollywood Reporter* were coded for this study. Annual special issues, such as "Women in Entertainment: Power 100," were not included.

Like newspapers of record, entertainment industry publications organize their coverage around news categories or "beats" (e.g., lawsuits and trials involving industry members, career moves of leading industry personnel) and seasonal industry events, such as television conventions, film festivals, and awards competitions. The *Hollywood Reporter's* coverage of the global television marketplace ranged from relatively short items published without a byline, usually no longer than a few paragraphs and consisting of little more than basic information about a particular transaction (e.g., identification of the parties to the transaction or its underlying business strategy, such as "the network was looking for programming with more local themes"), to much longer, glossy, multipaged features or special sections that consisted of extensive coverage and analysis of annual television convention marketplaces, global industry trends, national industry developments, and interviews with leading industry figures. These

longer features were written by established staff journalists who specialize in coverage of television's global market.

Because television industries are, first and foremost, commercial, critical appraisal in industry trade publications is distinctive in that it deftly blends evaluative criteria that address entertainment value as well as product quality to predict potential profitability. These publications' ultimate focus on predicting a product's commercial viability is what differentiates their evaluations from those of periodicals that write for the general viewing public, in which, instead, critics assist audiences in ascertaining the ways in which a program might entertain (D. D. Bielby, Moloney, & Ngo, 2005). Consequently, the content category that dominated all others in industry coverage was that of economic or financial news; indeed, nearly every other topic of discussion was embedded within that framework. The vast majority of the strictly financial news items consisted of brief, unelaborated reports of industry developments, whereas others provided more extensive coverage of the industry's economic state and included discussion of trends, emerging markets, genres, and programs. Because the focus of the analysis reported here was the contribution of product appraisals to the market environment, articles that mentioned any topic other than those pertaining strictly to financial transactions were selected for analysis. On the basis of this criterion, a total of 110 articles were identified.

Substantive categories of coverage about the industry that drew on information pertaining to successful exporting were inductively developed and refined using keywords to identify topics for analysis. Categories emerged that included the subjects listed in Table 1, such as consideration of local appeal and reference to product quality. These topics usually were discussed in the phrasing or vernacular of the industry, and often they were crafted around particular programs under development or those being bought or sold as possible interest to the international market. Sometimes coverage of a particular program extended over time, becoming, in turn, illustrative of marketplace dynamics. When a particular program or concept repeatedly appeared, it was noted and tracked for whether the series became a hit or turned into a failure. These trackings constituted a chronological subset of articles that consisted of elaborated coverage about a series. Within these subsets, any pertinent discussion was recorded.

## Findings

### *Who Speaks*

Research (D. D. Bielby & Harrington, 2008; Havens, 2006) on the overall structure of the world market for television has found that program acquisition is handled by mid-level executives, such as managers and directors of departments and divisions, and that buyers who attend television conventions come prepared not only to appraise a program's cultural suitability or appropriateness for local audiences but to negotiate adaptations as necessary. During face-to-face meetings that take place as part of a potential sale, for example, program features—revealed through demonstration tapes and/or



**Table 1.** Content Categories and Selected Terms

Category	Terms
Locale/location	Appeals to every culture, believable to local audiences, Russian flavor, more Latin look and feel
Aesthetics	Beautiful stories, quirkier, higher quality
Financial	Branded consumer franchises, track record, get eyes on the screen
Genre	Format, exciting telenovelas format
Emotional format	Intensity of the moment, shocking, positive, emotionally driven, nostalgia television
Narrative emotion	Resonant, feel-good family drama, going to grab them, intensity of the moment
Product quality	Production values, quality and experiment, quality homegrown programming, quality series, top-notch production values
Popularity	Popular, popular genre, quality, watercooler hits, light entertainment
Complexity	Multidimensional characters; people like surprises, twists, and mysteries
Success measures	Success, top rated, much anticipated show
Transcendent	Universal appeal, universal stories, universality
Quality	Quality participation television, poor content, more expensive

in printed and online materials prepared by the production or distribution companies—are raised and discussed. Concerns vary by country but may include depictions of violence, sexual intimacy, nudity, women's autonomy, or cohabitation; the use of vulgar language; discussion of personal matters; and representations of particular political beliefs or ideologies. Because appraisal may occur all along the chain of development that precedes a global sale, buyers who select a potentially problematic product for purchase can elect to manage unsuitable material through a variety of means. Such strategies may include negotiating elimination of offending episodes, redubbing offensive dialogue, airing a series in late-night time periods, or canceling a purchase altogether after reevaluation. In short, appraisal of aesthetic properties of programs is of central concern throughout the distribution process in television's world market.

Beyond the activities that take place on the trade show floor, the larger industry milieu is saturated with attention-garnering discourse about products that reaches a crescendo at the international conventions, and its focus is to delineate products as brands, as noted above. However, there are at least two additional features of this discourse that suggest that its function is more encompassing. First, throughout the development of a series, discourse builds in increments that increasingly highlight varying degrees or kinds of information about the show, and second, the discourse reaches a zenith when a series or concept has become or is on the verge of becoming globally successful, a development that may or may not coincide with the television trade conventions. Because such discourse is pivotal to the market, its level of detail is important, and it rolls out in stages of elaboration. So, when a program concept is just being launched, program descriptions in industry outlets are brief and factual, and

typically just a show's creator and executive producer are quoted. However, after a show reaches a notable level of global success, spokespersons that include executive-level international division heads are brought into the mix, and aesthetic elements in place since the program's inception are incorporated and enunciated.

For instance, early mentions of *Top Model*, the global version of *America's Next Top Model*, contained minimal details, in part because the industry was already familiar with the originating concept. However, after *Top Model* became a successful international television franchise (one article mentioned that it appeared in more than 110 countries, including numerous notoriously difficult-to-penetrate Middle Eastern ones and that it was a locally produced format in an additional 11 territories), CBS Paramount International Television's international television division president, Armando Nunez Jr., was quoted along with the show's creators—former high-fashion model, star, and creator Tyra Banks and her co-executive producer Ken Mok—to pinpoint the show's attributes that accounted for its universal appeal. Early on in the show's introduction to the marketplace, only Mok or Banks was quoted about the show's features, but after the show became a hit globally, the high-ranking executive Nunez was brought in to emphasize the elements of "beauty, fashion, and drama," and Mok's role expanded to encompass mention of the attributes underlying the concept's international success—"the universality to the world of fashion" and its "strong storytelling" of the Cinderella story (Brennan, 2006b, p. 14). But even as the appeal of the narrative and the draw of the show's emotional elements were now highlighted to account for its success with worldwide audiences, additional production-related considerations were incorporated into industry coverage. For the now fully internationalized *Top Model*, these included features pivotal to successful global adaptations, such as its "very specific bible" on how to operate and its use of "a clear format for each country" to guide tailoring the show's concept to varying locales.

As this illustration reveals, a substantial aspect of industry discourse consists of a steady effort at post hoc claims-making to achieve placement and standing in the ever-shifting landscape of the global television marketplace. However, unlike the domestic U.S. market, there are no readily apparent predetermined cultural arbiters to interpret and appraise a show's notable features a priori for their entertainment or commercial value. In the domestic U.S. market, professional television critics as we know them conduct this kind of evaluation; however, with no direct counterpart in the world market to speak in an equivalent way to the entire industry or its audience, the effort falls to those who transact sales. Thus, the task of identifying and elaborating a program's potentially appealing aesthetic elements early on in the life cycle of a program falls to a distributor's marketing or publicity department when creating brochures or demo tapes for use during sales transactions. When these representations enter public discourse, an ever-expanding circle of production executives adopts them as attributions to account for a program's success. These attributions are made public through industry reporting and become enriched over time by ever-more-elaborated explanations for global success by those who oversee a program's distribution.

## Production Appraisal and Deployment

When a program is considered for purchase or a concept for a licensing, all of its cultural features are weighed, but given the absence of global counterparts to domestic television critics, what criteria are emphasized in product appraisals, and what form does critical evaluation take in the world marketplace? The analysis here found two main categories of appraisal: The first and most dominant emphasized rational, concrete, and/or empirical evidence that was relied on to predict commercial success in the marketplace. For example, program marketing materials at MIPCOM 2007 included distributors' scheduling plans, such as the day of the week and placement in the evening lineup, and these were supplemented with reports of strong ratings. Underscoring the importance of this kind of information for achieving successful distribution in the global arena is the comment of one network president, Belinda Melendez:

Our clients need all the information (about marketing plans and early) ratings they can get these days about any new show, and we can provide them access to a lot of information at a market like MIP that we hope will be of value to them. (Brennan, 2007a, pp. S1-S4)

The second category consisted of aesthetic properties or qualities, and these included several subcategories of appraisal criteria. One subcategory consisted of the claims invoked about the *emotional appeal* of a program's aesthetic elements, which are intended to assure buyers that a series has the potential to become a success through affective engagement. The short-lived *Cane*, for example, premiered in the fall season of 2007, and early coverage about it in the industry press was enthusiastic because of particular elements of potential affective appeal to international audiences—the “universal theme” of immigrants seeking and finding success in a new land, its “international” cast of Latino actors with global reputations, the complexity and depth of its characters who engage in “great human stories” but who also engage a “darker side with crime, so that it [the show] stands out from other serialized dramas,” and its attractive visuals consisting of “Miami's South Beach settings” (Brennan, 2007c).

A related subcategory consisted of overt claims about *quality*. Quality matters greatly to buyers because of, among other reasons, the exorbitant prices they pay for American series. Reference to product quality in industry discourse is often blatantly phrased in terms of monetary value, as in “the quality is on the screen” (referring to production standards), but brokers also refer to quality as an inherent property that distinguishes one company's product from those of others. Discriminating declarations, such as those by Kevin Beggs—“We're not interested in just creating churn, [w]e're now focused on creating hits” (Nordyke, 2007, p. 2) and “High concepts cut through the clutter, [s]o programs such as *Lost* present a more interesting proposition for the foreign buyer than other fare” (Brennan, 2006e, p. 14)—are not unusual.

A third subcategory consisted of assurances of a product to *entertain*, which are made tangible by brokers invoking themselves as the metric or standard for evaluation.

Here, participants in the world market for television come closest to the conventional role of critics in elite art worlds. For instance, CEO Chris Coelen of RDF USA, one of the leading distribution companies in the world, assured the ability of his programs to entertain because they achieved his standard of “something you can touch and feel and wrap your head around” (Andreeva, 2008, p. 16). A related form of assurance is signaled by the emotionally expressive terms invoked by buyers and sellers when discussing programs. David Gyngell, CEO of Granada America, a subsidiary of one of Europe’s leading commercial television production and distribution companies, effusively stated, “I’m *passionate* [about my products; emphasis added]” (Brennan, 2006f, p. 106); and at the LA Screenings, Andrea Kier, the Los Angeles–based president of acquisitions and programming for Australia’s Nine Network, stated, “I’ve seen the first episode and I’m *desperate* [emphasis added] to see the second” when speaking of his company’s decision to purchase the hit U.S. series *Desperate Housewives* (Brennan, 2006d, p. 10).

As one might expect, industry discourse tends to assume a consistent or harmonious comprehension among industry participants regarding what is at issue. However, disharmony—or to extend the buzz analogy, a “hum”—arises on occasion, and when it does, how is it managed?<sup>7</sup> There were two cases of apparent disharmony that arose during the period of analysis for this research, and both were for shows that combine genre elements: *Ugly Betty*, the American adaptation of the enormously popular Colombian telenovela, *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea* (“I am Betty, the ugly one”), and ABC’s serialized drama *Desperate Housewives*. In its original, Colombian incarnation, *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea* was a dramatic telenovela laced with irony. “Betty” is highly educated but her lack of attractiveness interferes with finding work for which she is qualified. Desperate, she accepts work as a secretary to a company president and endures the insults of her coworkers. Eventually she is promoted to an advanced position, becomes romantically involved with her boss, and receives a grooming makeover. It is a story of empathy, perseverance, and the value of internal loveliness versus external physical beauty to the social order.

Telenovelas specialize in narratives that are often culturally or politically relevant, or as one Argentinean journalist put it, they “express the emotion of people in difficult situations and humanize their stories much better than any newspaper article can” (Byrnes, 2008, p. 12). In its American adaptation, however, the complications introduced by irony were transformed into comedy, and a show otherwise regarded as the Latin version of a soap opera became labeled as a comedy-drama. When called on to retrospectively explain its status as global phenomenon, the international sales director of its originating network said, “An important factor was that it appealed to markets looking for *comedic* [italics added] telenovelas, rather than the more traditional novelas” (Maria Hernandez of Columbia’s RCN, quoted in Hecht, 2006, p. 18). Yet, even as the program continues to spread internationally in increasingly varied forms, it remains solidly classified as a telenovela by the industry press and network executives. This apparent inconsistency in industry classification has yet to become anything more than that.

A similar example occurred with ABC's *Desperate Housewives*. The program debuted as a "serialized drama" (Brennan, 2006e, p. 14) with overtly ironic overtones, and it, too, has succeeded at transcending borders. However, a recent *Hollywood Reporter* feature posed the show's ambiguous classification directly. "Is it a comedy? Drama? It's a comedy when it comes to awards consideration, a darkly comedic drama in most other respects. But dubbing it a mere hybrid still feels insufficient" (Richmond, 2009, p. 9). The ambiguity of this show's form was furthered by one of its lead actresses, who was quoted describing the show as a clever balance of "comedy-drama." However, when discussing the success of its Argentinean version, *Housewives* is described by its production manager, Leonardo Aranguibel, as containing "many elements of a telenovela, which is the backbone of Latin American television [where] women are always the protagonists" (Byrnes, 2006, p. 14). Comedy, or even irony, is not even mentioned; the hybrid nature of the series is made irrelevant; and instead, the classic elements of telenovelas are emphasized. The point here is that other than quizzical mentions by the press, little is made of any inconsistency. Such handling suggests that that even when those writing for industry trade papers recognize discontinuity across industry sources, they do not move into an overtly judgmental stance that would contribute in a more direct way to cultural assessments that account for how or why a particular program succeeds. In short, they permit the rhetorical claims of brokers, distributors, executives, and others to stand as given, suggesting a limit to their cultural authority.

In sum, although appraisal of cultural products exists in overtly commercial contexts, in the absence of designated professional critics or cultural arbiters in the world market, boundary spanners become product appraisers, and because their claims are guided by commercial interests that are integrally linked to evolving uncertainties, their efforts are fluid and often post hoc, even as they appear to rely on a consistently applied set of criteria. Perhaps this is why explanations for success can seem so anecdotal.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This research focused on the contribution of television program buyers and sellers in their boundary-spanning role and the ways in which they engage in critical appraisal within the global marketplace of television distribution. By attending to the substance of industry discourse about product quality, the larger goal of this project was to understand how that discourse is structured and contributes, in turn, to the structure of the marketplace. Findings reveal that the content of product appraisals consists of two key categories: rational, concrete criteria that empirically signal quality and aesthetic criteria that invoke cultural indicators of entertainment. The latter include overt claims about quality per se, expressive terminology about products, and experience in the industry as a benchmark for appraisal.

Although these appraisal categories are consistent with those in the domestic U.S. market, where commercial and artistic constituencies must be managed (W. T. Bielby &

Bielby, 1994), evaluations in the global market are part of a more complex process in which globalization and transnationalization bring unique complications to the social organization of cultural worlds. Fluid and inexact market boundaries, participants who may vary from year to year, and malleable cultural forms are just some of the issues that arise. Furthermore, culture industries bring their own distinctive dynamics to creative worlds, chief among them an explicit profit orientation that shapes every facet of their operation, complicating, but not deterring, the need for product appraisal on aesthetic dimensions. Despite these complications, participants within transnational culture worlds manage to align understandings along pertinent dimensions, even as they anticipate the need for further filtering about the appropriateness of the very products they jointly comprehend.

Clarifying the rhetorical structure and dynamics surrounding categories of product appraisal was a focus of this study, but its larger theoretical goal was attaining greater insight into the contribution of discourse and discursive frames to the structuring and structuration of commercial markets that deal with cultural products. Scholarship on the television market tends to foreground television's economic properties rather than those that are cultural. Media economists, for example, regard television programs as "assets consisting of bundles of broadcast rights" (Owen & Wildman, 1992, p. 181), and other scholars emphasize the contractual nature of business arrangements versus relational arrangements (Cantor & Cantor, 1986; Caves, 2000). Consequently, information about corporate "brands," "ratings," and "going prices" dominates the attention of the industry and its analysts, whereas considerations about product differentiation, originality, novelty, and related factors that signal potential entertainment value are transmitted in less clear-cut ways or are pushed to the background.

Although economic considerations reveal how the industry concretizes business, designates commercial value, and minimizes financial uncertainty, understanding designations of aesthetic value are just as important, because these are the sites where participants align understandings about cultural standards and related expectations when appraising the suitability of products of a culture industry to entertain local audiences. "Good" programming or "good" concepts purportedly matter most to those who distribute products on the global market, even though international conventions "have few pretensions to art" (Havens, 2003, p. 18). This suggests that analyzing the discourse that captures and conveys appraisal of product elements makes a crucial contribution to organizing understanding of the dynamics of trade within this marketplace. Buying and selling clearly entails more than just reading program descriptions; it entails analysis and interpretation of cultural adequacy in the fullest sense. In sum, analysis of the industry discourse of brokers and other boundary spanners about program elements offers a useful inroad to clarifying the apparent chaos of this market environment.

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## Notes

1. For example, recent transformations in the U.S. industry include the adoption of multiple distribution platforms, the formation and dissolution of conglomerates (such as that of fabled AOL-Time Warner), the reduction in product because of the U.S. writers strike of 2007-2008, the global economic downturn and the depressed economies of various countries, escalating production costs that drive the U.S. industry to generate ever more revenue from the international market, ongoing protectionist stances by various countries, and industry developments in other regions of the globe, such as the formation of the pan-European station group resulting from the megamerger of ProSiebenSat.1 with SBS (see Guider & Turner, 2007).
2. See, for example, the description of the modest international origins of *Pop Stars*, which served as the genesis for the hit American incarnation, *American Idol* (D. D. Bielby & Harrington, 2004).
3. These large conventions are augmented by smaller venues sponsored by the major studios for targeted markets, such as Disney-ABC International Television's 1-day program market for Central and Eastern European buyers (Turner, 2008).
4. The U.S. television industry offers this kind of access to critics at the biannual meetings of the Television Critics Association.
5. Kennedy (2008) demonstrates how cognitive understandings of markets are derived from emerging presentations of firms, underscoring the importance of linguistic contributions to product differentiation, and more.
6. For instance, the Netherlands' Endemol, a global leader in reality programming, announced filling a management position that is charged with "establishing and managing relationships with global brands and overseeing the company's marketing activities, including branding, communications, event management, brand affiliation and branded content" (Turner, 2009). Even entities not exclusively targeting the global market increasingly have units devoted to its oversight. Examples include the talent agency ICM, which has an entire division dedicated to developing formats for international television and media, and leading British production company ITV Productions, which has a unit devoted to developing programs for the U.S. market.
7. I thank Wendy Griswold for suggesting this.

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## Bio

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