

Dream... Believe... Survive: To be In or Out?

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Television Reviews of
Star Circle Quest (ABS-CBN)
and **Starstruck** (GMA)

Reality programs are the most recent additions to television. Crossing existing genre lines, the reality program has emerged in different program formats including game shows, talent searches, travel and adventure and dating programs to name a few. The success of such programs in the United States – *Survivor*, *The Amazing Race*, *The Bachelor* and *American Idol* – has established the potential of reality programs to create a marketable product through a strong audience base. The drive to create programs outside of the existing mix to provide audiences with more and fresher choices is the spirit behind the reality program genre. The success of some of its predecessors has established a new set of programs with a fresh allure for its audiences. The drive of the programs to create and re-create existing television formats have shaped these programs into combinations of several TV genres topping its real-life situations.

This phenomenon is what Turner (2001) calls the promiscuous hybridity of modern television formats. This is all too apparent with television programs that lay claim to the reality television concept. *Survivor* incorporates elements of the game shows, adventure and soap operas to create their version of this genre. Similarly, *Amazing Race* includes the elements of travel programs and soap opera in their game show format. Competition has pushed the television industry to come up with continuously evolving formats making it even harder and harder to create clear definitions. While some of the products of this evolution may be questionable, the fluid nature of this genre allows these different deviations. Also, audiences seem to be insatiable in their continued

patronage of these television programs, which gives the networks even more incentive to keep on conceptualizing and producing them. While it is still difficult to clearly define reality programs, there is no doubt that this genre has created a niche for itself in television programming.

Several of such programs have also emerged in the Philippines, the most popular of which belong to the talent search category of the genre. The talent search has evolved from mere presentations to the holistic involvement of the programs and the audiences in the participants' lives. This is most apparent with the talent searches *Starstruck* of GMA and *Star Circle Quest* of ABS-CBN. From their inception, both programs have concluded two sets of searches, one for young adults and one for children. The phenomenal success of the first two seasons of these programs was apparent with the high ratings and audience participation in these programs. As audiences are drawn into the real-life experiences of the contestants, their dramatic struggles and tear-jerking stories, audiences keep on watching these programs and then talking about them. The contestants have become household names and a constant topic of conversation for audiences. Similarly, their respective winners have been a frequent presence in their own networks' programs, movies and other activities. To date, both networks have concluded their third set of the two talent searches, again for young adults.

The basic premise of both programs is to choose through a series of auditions and tests a group of young adults who would go through challenges predetermined by the and aired in the programs. The challenges are performance in nature and designed to constantly test the abilities of the contestants as performers. These challenges are in the form of singing, dancing, hosting, acting and the like. The contestants are first briefed and trained in the specific task, made to perform these tasks, and then assessed. One by one, they are eliminated from the competition through the judges' and audiences' assessment of their performances. At the end of the season, there are usually be only one or two winners. The winners are promised fame and fortune through contracts with their respective networks.

GMA's *StarStruck* has a simpler structure compared to ABS-CBN's *Star Circle Quest*. The program starts with the challenges for the day or what they call the *artista* (artist) tests. The program then employs directors or trainers in a specific field, whom they call *experts*, who would be assigned to teach the contestants the basic principles behind a specific performance (acting, hosting, dancing or singing). The contestants are

then given some time to prepare for the challenge, which they then perform before the experts. After their performances, the experts make positive or negative comments but more usually in the form of very sarcastic, brutal and biting remarks which at times drive some of the contestants to tears. At the end of the week, there is usually a process of elimination which will use the previous weeks' performances as a gauge to eliminate the weakest contestant.

This elimination is done in the presence of the *council*, the members of which come at the end of every week to give their own comments and assessment of the past week's performances usually in the same cruel manner. As a final touch, audiences may vote for their favorite contestants through short message service (SMS), or text messages. The voting even gives audiences the chance to win prizes from the show's sponsors. The scores of the experts, the council and the audiences are then tallied to reveal who will be eliminated for that week. The survivors then return the next week to perform new artista tests and the process starts all over again.

ABS-CBN's *Star Circle Quest*, on the other hand, uses existing television formats, usually from their own programs, for the challenges instead of artista tests. For example, the program may choose a magazine program as the exercise for the day where the contestants act as hosts or actors for a soap opera. ABS-CBN's other programs are incorporated through the formats *Star Circle Quest* uses for its challenges for the day. They will usually have a mini-version of an existing television program in ABS-CBN to serve as title for their own challenges. At other times, they are asked to act with the actors from existing soap operas and sitcoms. The actors and hosts of their other programs also serve as the *mentors* for the contestants. At the beginning of the program, the *mentors* give them tips on how to best perform in the challenges. As the contestants perform, the mentors comment on the performances, which are only directed to the audiences and not to the competitors. The biting remarks are usually from *jurors* who assess the contestants at the end of the challenges. Audiences are also encouraged to vote for their favorite *questor* through SMS and phone calls. The audience members who participate in the voting are also given an incentive through prizes from sponsors. Finally, at the end of the week, the scores of the *mentors*, the *jurors* and the audiences are tallied to show who is in and who is out of the competition.

The treatment of these programs may have slight differences but their structures are similar and almost identical. The challenges are

basically done the same way with the same end result, a painful comment on the inadequacy of contestants' performance. The *experts* in *Starstruck* are the *mentors* in *Star Circle Quest* and the *council* of GMA are the *jurors* of ABS-CBN. The audiences even participate in the same manner with similar incentives.

The similarity of these talent searches which appear in the top two television networks in the country affirms that television perpetuates its own ideology (White 1992) through the dominant perceptions of its producers and participants. The ideological approach of analyzing television genres prove that genre becomes an instrument of control for the television industry (Feuer 1992). This is when the particular genre positions its audiences in such a way to as to "naturalize the dominant ideologies expressed in the text" (Feuer 1992: 145), in this case the television program. A close look at the two programs shows that the search for new talents is controlled by the existing tunnel-vision of the industry towards the characteristics of a good talent. There are several ways by which this is manifested. First, the use of mentors and experts from the industry who teach and train the competitors promote the ideology to which they were also similarly trained. The contestants who have no alternative forms with which to learn their skills abide by them and thus perpetuate a similar idea. The audiences who have watched these mentors and experts believe in their abilities and also believe that this is the best way to measure the qualities of the contestants.

The use of existing television formats where the contestants will perform is also another means of control. This is especially true for *Star Circle Quest* where the existing programs of ABS-CBN are incorporated in the challenges. Through these existing formats, the contestants are trained to adapt their performance styles and knowledge to the existing programs, which we can argue, perpetuates its own ideology. By making the contestants participate in the existing structure of the station, they are indoctrinated to the system through the form of the challenges. The same formats that the audiences watch also leads to the dominance of the prevailing mindset of the contestants' performance.

The use of the network's existing programs also show the intertextual nature of Philippine television. A television program can no longer stand alone separate from the other television programs of the station. At present, any TV program, even a news program, may be a means of promoting the other television programs of the station. This intertextual nature has provided the stations in these two programs not

only a means to train and judge the contestants according to their accepted styles and guidelines, thus perpetuating the same among its contestants and audiences, but also to promote the other television programs in these programs as well.

Third, the brutal remarks of the *experts*, *jurors* and *council* in both programs have a shock value for their contestants. The painful comments ingrain in them specific standards by which to measure their abilities. While some contestants do resist the comments of the judges and still keep a positive attitude towards their performances, most immediately admit to their weak performances and accept the judge's comments as the absolute truth. In both programs, the *council* and the *jurors* are represented by only three people who are all part of the local entertainment industry. This is a very limited means of judging the capacity of the talents and an effective way to inculcate into the contestants only a limited way of judging their abilities. These judges are presented as experts to the audiences so that they accept the value of their remarks as true and accept them as the final word on the contestants' abilities.

Finally, the participation of the audiences through voting gives them the false belief that they have a hand in the end-result of the program. These votes are not necessarily a part of the program to serve as a feedback mechanism to the producers but as another means of commodifying the contestants and its audiences. For example, the votes of audiences in SCQ who buy the product of its sponsor will give their votes for their favorites ten times the voting power compared to their counterparts who did not consume the product. The contestant with the most votes for the week will also be given a chance to move on regardless of his/her performance for the week. The bottom line in these instances is that commerce wins over actual talent.

There is a danger that these talent searches by the networks in the form of reality programs may be regarded as true means of choosing talents. As proven by the long lines in the auditions of the current *StarStruck* and *Star Circle Quest*, the audiences, especially the young adults, are made to believe that this is the best way for them to get discovered as actors or performers. There should be awareness as to the deeper implications and underpinnings of the reasons behind these talent searches. However, due to the commercial character of television, the industry continues to perpetuate the myth that such programs are authentic. A closer look reveals that it takes more than dreams and beliefs to survive and more than talent to be in or out of the television industry.

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