

ONLY A GAME

Peter Guttridge

Quiz shows are the favourite tv viewing for millions of people. They are standard tv fare. They are also pernicious, cheap and damaging, fostering as they do our worst instincts - greed, envy and contempt and underpinned as they are by ultimately demeaning assumptions.

Games and quiz shows have long been with us. The baby boom generation were weaned on them, bottle-fed on the genteel *What's My Line* and the relative razzamatazz of *Take Your Pick* and *Double Your Money*. Since then they have proliferated. They divide roughly into three sorts. There are 'celebrity' shows like *All Star Secrets* or *Blankety Blank* where 'celebrities' interact in an entertaining way and the 'ordinary' contestants take a back seat; there are the upmarket quiz shows where the simplicity of the old style *Criss Cross Quiz* has been replaced by the portentousness of *Mastermind*; and there are the gen-u-ine game shows.

The game shows cause the trouble. Usually the format is the same in each case - indeed it's a format unchanged since the old days of the quiz inquisitor Michael Miles inviting contestants to take the money or open the box (in *Take Your Pick*) and Hughie Green oozing mid-Atlantic charm in *Double Your Money*. There is a compere, a number of contestants, and big (or biggish) prizes.

Then the underlying assumption was of happy family units, white of course, whose idea of a treat was winning any kind of consumer item: something for the home or garden, maybe a family holiday or a car if they won the star prize. The compere was always male, always assisted by dumb (literally) glamorous girls. Those were days of comparative innocence. These days the shows have become harder edged - contestants compete with each other more regularly than before, for example - but the underlying assumptions remain the same.

The family unit is reinforced more overtly now in game shows which have families competing (*Family Fortunes*, *Play Your Cards Right*). In 3-2-1 couples compete. These couples and families are interchangeable, one from another. Not in real

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life, but on the shows they are not encouraged to show any originality or personality. The shows where individuals compete (*Bob's Full House*, *The Price is Right*) do nothing more to encourage individuality. Indeed, the function of the contestants is to be objects of envy - and to be stooges for the comperes.

These comperes are, for the most part, stand up comics in search of a comedy show. As 'personality presenters' these shows belong to them. Max Bygraves, Bob Monkhouse, Bruce Forsyth and the others are firmly centre stage, the contestants their stooges. Their contempt is displayed in various ways. Bob Monkhouse's porcelain face and archly-raised eyebrows mask a nimble brain and a sharp wit. But his wit has its lethal side. Should a man try, in a boorish way, to be funny Bob will always have a put-down ready to make the man appear foolish. With women he's patronising if they're pretty, sarcastic if they exhibit some intelligence.

Nicholas Parsons too thinks he is above his show, *Sale of the Century*. Not a comic, Parsons rules in a patrician manner. His



particular expertise is in parading the contestants in front of the big prizes they might have won but didn't. In his manner it's implied that if they hadn't been so thick they would have done. Parsons's show has beautiful women as assistants. Their sole function is to drape themselves over the prizes as additional objects of consum-

er lust. Such women assist on all these shows. In Bruce Forsyth's *Play Your Cards Right* they are called 'dollies'.

Why are there no women comperes? Why do women always assist with, not run, the shows? You might think it's because they've got good taste, but it could be because these shows are by their nature *patronising*. The comperes exhibit territoriality very firmly. They are matey with the men - unless the men challenge their authority by, say, trying to be witty. In this case comperes put the men firmly in their places. They flirt with the girls provided the girls are giggly, put them in their place if they are not. Even Larry Grayson used to flirt with the men as a way of control-by-embarrassment. And in all these shows, the comperes have the collusion of the live audience (and the viewer at home).

In *The Price is Right*, the audience is part of the show. Nobody ever went broke underestimating public taste but have we really sunk to *The Price is Right*? When it started a couple of years ago it went straight to the top of the ratings, despite or perhaps because of, Lesley Crowther's

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parody compere: stiff manner, awesomely pomaded hair, strait-jacket suit and stick-on leer. The premise is simplicity itself. Naked consumerism. Contestants guess the price of various goods. If they guess correctly, they get the goods. This is game show reduced to its functioning parts. There's no pretence that the show is about anything but making acquisitions. No irrelevant quiz question, no silly riddles to work out.

Contestants are summoned from the audience with the cry of 'come on down', swept along on a wave of deliberately encouraged hysteria. But then speed is the thing in most of these game shows. Thinking is a pretty non-visual activity - you get a blank face, maybe pursed lips. You don't often get the person who frowns and moves his lips when thinking. So the shows have to move along at a cracking pace. Bob Monkhouse creates the illusion of excitement by pushing his shows (formerly *Family Fortunes*, now *Bob's Full House*) along, Ted Rogers causes total confusion by the speed with which his show moves. 3-2-1 depends on unravelling complex

clues in the form of riddles. Such is the show's inanity and speed the riddles are as incomprehensible after Ted's explanations as before. But the riddles are one way of getting away from the old fashioned formula of general knowledge questions for contestants to answer.

Is it a sign of the times that several shows now rely not on knowledge but on a consensus view? *Family Fortunes* pioneered the idea which *Play Your Cards Right* now follows: the correct answer to a question depends on public opinion. One hundred people are asked to name a country in South America. The four most frequently mentioned become the 'right' answers. Contestants have to choose four countries and if they match what the sample poll came up with, they win. This means of course that originality, or any pretence at depth of knowledge, goes right out the window. If a contestant happens to know a lot about South America and comes up with smaller countries well, sorry pal, you're right but you're wrong. You have to conform to public opinion - or ignorance - to win anything.

The obverse of this approach comes in your *bona fide* intellectual shows: the quiz shows. The most popular is *Mastermind*. *Mastermind* gets the full treatment: solemnity, inspiring music, scholarly surroundings. No vulgar 'come on down' here. Here is dignity: intellectuals at work. But what we actually see is a demonstration of parrot learning. This kind of learning requires memory and the whole approach is to present parrot learning as genius, deliberately ignoring the fact that intelligence and knowledge are not synonyms, that intelligence is the use you make of knowledge.

Most of our quiz shows are from America where there are thousands more waiting to be picked up for transatlantic adaptation. Homegrown shows are popping up all the time on all four channels. Yet though the shows may change the assumptions remain the same. It's perhaps surprising that no attempt has been made to radicalise these shows, as has happened in other areas of popular television (sit-coms and soaps). Only a game, but the rules need changing.




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