Recombinant television genres and Doogie Howser, M.D.

by Matthew P. McAllister

Genre is a broad explanatory concept for cultural analysis, applicable to Shakespeare and Superman. One particular point of attraction of genre for many critics is its explanatory power for industrialized mediated production. Feuer argues that genre was applied very early to film by Adorno-esque critics of "mass culture," who used it to highlight and condemn the assembly-line imperative of motion picture studios (117). The set-up of the studio machines encouraged formulaic production: because the studios looked to past successes for future projects, and because each had specific personnel on contract who specialized in certain categories of production, studios began to specialize in certain genres of film.

Given the industrial and economic nature of television production, it would seem that the concept of genre would be a most fitting one for that medium as well. Because of television's economic thrust, its content should be even more likely than other cultural forms to be explained by genres. Certainly the industrial context and audience expectations of television encourage some sort of generic production, as the development of standardized formula allows the creative personnel of television to constantly crank out programs and overall helps to guarantee a fairly predictable audience for different categories of shows.

But things are not that simple. Compared with the concept of genre in film, the same concept in television is problematic. In the motion picture industry, we can define one complete, uninterrupted entity—and these entities can easily be categorized as the cop film, the horror film, the gangster film, etc. In TV, on the other hand, the industrial imperative is to make the viewer forget the distinction between program and commercial, or program and program, and so the concept of genre becomes harder to apply. Moreover, the television show must generate numerous, specific plot episodes—the program premise. Given these factors, TV formats/shows/ads/genres tend to bleed into each other. With this lack of clear distinction, one wonders if the television program can even be said to have one, overarching defining element as the motion picture does (Feuer 279).

Along these lines, when we try to classify recent television shows according to genres that have been established by film, radio, or early television, we may find that perfect "fits" are hard to locate. To use Gitlin's biological metaphor, there are very few "pure" gene pools found in television programming. TV shows often are "recombinants," or splices of two or more previously existing, and successful, types. Mixtures of comedies and dramas ("dramedies"), like Sisters or Brooklyn Bridge, may be found on the schedule during a given season. In fact, as Vande Berg notes (91), the era of the dramedy may have been signified by Moonlighting's nominee as both best drama and best comedy during the 1985-86 season. Mixtures of com-
edies and game shows ("gamedies") may be the new descriptors for shows like Studs and Grudge Match. Certain key personnel of the television industry (Fred Silverman, Steven Bochco) may specialize in developing recombinant television programs. Many of the most publicized programs of recent television have been recombinants, including the above-mentioned Moonlighting as well as Hill Street Blues (Barney Miller meets Fort Apache, The Bronx, Gitlin, p. 279), Twin Peaks (what Newsweek called a "soap opera/murder mystery"), Cop Rock (a "musical detective drama"), and Eerie, Indiana ("The Wonder Years meets Twin Peaks," according to TV Guide). The point I wish to make is that often such a combination will especially "click," both industrially (it will be easy to produce and a ratings success) and ideologically (people will like it, and the elements of the two genres will fit together in such a way to reinforce or popularize their messages). Doogie Howser, M.D., I believe, is such a program: an archetype of a recombinant TV genre, in which elements of two—the teen genre and the doctor genre—are spliced for a perfect iconic and ideological fit.

Doogie Howser, M.D. as a Recombinant Success Story

Because of his stellar track record, television writer-producer Steven Bochco was given a ten million dollar, ten television series contract with ABC. Bochco, of course, had previous recombinant hits with Hill Street Blues, St. Elsewhere, and LA Law. The first series produced as a result of this contract was Doogie Howser, M.D., which premiered in September 1989 on Thursday nights. The show focuses on the (at first) sixteen-year-old child prodigy Doogie, a character reportedly inspired by Bochco's father, who was a child prodigy violinist (Marin). With Doogie having graduated from Princeton at age 10, medical school (at the top of his class) at 14, and beginning a hospital internship at 16, the show deals with the unlikely dilemmas faced by a teenager going through both puberty and pediatrics.

Although the program initially received mixed reviews (thumbs up by Zurawik of the Baltimore Sun; thumbs down by Millman of the San Francisco Examiner), it became the biggest, in fact the only, new hit of the 1990 fall season. Drawing on the demographics from its lead-in program (initially Growing Pains, and later The Wonder Years), the show does well with teens and young women audiences, two markets very desirable for advertisers (Haithman). After the 1990-91 season, the program ranked 24 overall, just behind LA Law, with a 14.7 average rating (Brooks and Marsh 1107). Although ratings slipped in the 1991-92 season, the fall premiere episode, where Doogie lost his virginity, scored a 16.8 rating (Miller 36), and throughout the season the program usually won its time slot. Critically, the program receives occasional accolades. TV Guide listed Doogie as one of the "Best Teen Shows" for young people in a March 1992 issue. The program will be released into syndication in fall 1993 (Guider 36), maybe the most economically desirable mark of success, and first-run production will probably cease, at the latest, following the 1994 season, when the title character turns 21 (Beck 3).

What makes this program so successful? In large part, it is its nearly brilliant combination of two established genres, one designed to pull in the teens and the other designed to pull in adults, especially women. These two genres are the teen comedy and the medical doctor one, each
with its own specific characters, icons, and themes.

**The Teen and the Doctor**
**Television Genres**

The two genres co-opted by *Doogie Howser, M.D.* are established cultural genres, both found in a variety of popular culture forms. Both are traditionally very malleable and easily combined with other ones (as illustrated by the 1950s’ teen flick *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, combining teens and horror; and NBC’s *Quincy, M.E.*, combining medicine and detectives). However, before they could be merged together as successfully as they were in the ABC program, they had to undergo certain fairly recent changes in their formula.

The “teen comedy” is probably the least established of the two. Although there certainly were precedents for very early popular culture aimed at teenagers (as Mickey Rooney would say, “Let’s put on a show!”), Doherty notes that the teen genre as a definable product really came into its own in the mid-1950s as the motion picture industry tried to capture the street roving teenaged market through the creation of the teen epic. With the exception of *The Aldrich Family*, an adaptation from radio airing from 1949 to 1953, successful TV programs—in this case sitcoms—centering on teens began to slowly filter into prime time in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as illustrated by CBS’s *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* from 1959 to 1963; ABC’s *The Patty Duke Show* from 1963 to 1966; and ABC’s *Gidget* (starring Sally Field) from 1965 to 1966. All three programs were influenced by the “teen trend” in movies, with the latter two explicitly so (*The Patty Duke Show* capitalizing on its star’s Oscar and motion picture success; *Gidget* being a continuation of the movie series).

These shows and their movie influences introduced several enduring elements into the teen comedy formula. The programs featured middle-class, clean, loving kids trying to advance their social lives in high school. The shows with male leads often portrayed them as misfits—not quite successful in their search for high school elite acceptance. Maynard G. Krebs helped to solidify the character type of the goofy best friend who often caused problems and added comic relief. Themes of dealing with the opposite gender, popularity and fitting in, and high school social mobility tended to dominate the programs. The parents and teachers of the programs, although old-fashioned, generally were warm-hearted and ultimately understanding. Often, the parents, especially the fathers, would impart wise advice that would save the day for the teens. Both Dobie Gillis and Gidget directly addressed the audience, a technique that continues today in teen movies and television shows and encourages a feeling that the shows were speaking immediately to the teens of America.

The genre underwent a significant mutation in the early to mid-1980s with the introduction of the mainstream, big-budgeted “teen sex comedy” in movies. *Risky Business* (1983), *Real Genius* (1985), *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), and the movies of John Hughes such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Pretty in Pink* (1986), and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986) helped to redefine the genre, especially when successfully translated into a form more savory for television (like *Parker Lewis Can’t Lose*, *The Wonder Years*, *Blossom*, and the short-lived TV version of *Ferris Bueller*). Certain elements remained, of course, such as dealing with the opposite sex (in practically all of the above instances), popularity (stressed especially in *The Breakfast Club*), the goofy friend (like Miles in *Risky Business* or Cameron in *Ferris Bueller*), and using direct address. In *Ferris Bueller* and its TV clone *Parker Lewis*, the characters turn and talk directly to the camera; direct address is also implied in the retrospective narration of *The Wonder Years*.

Overall, though, the eighties teen
films added an “edge” to the genre that was missing before, especially in television. Three key elements—additions that the TV versions picked up—especially highlight this edge: the emphasis on sex, the appropriation of the “us versus them” mentality from teen dramas, and the smart, hip teen hero.

Characters in modern teen sex comedies are not that concerned with dating, with going steady, or even with necking. They want to have sex. Joel in Risky Business calls a prostitute. Mitch, the 15-year-old brain in Real Genius, sleeps with his girlfriend. Even the TV versions of the genre have picked up this explicit sexual orientation: Becky Conner of Roseanne and Brenda Walsh of Beverly Hills 90210 both faced sexual situations in the 1991–92 television seasons.

In the recent teen comedies, and to a lesser degree in the television versions, teen characters are pitted against the adult world. Becky Conner is much more likely to rebel than Patty Lane. This characteristic has been adapted from the teen drama, such as Rebel Without a Cause and The Wild One. In the new version, authority figures, especially school administrators (like the nurse in Risky Business, Mr. Rooney in Ferris Bueller, Principal Musso in Parker Lewis, and Professor Hathaway in Real Genius) are more bureaucratic, buffoon-like, and unreasonable than in previous versions. In the movie versions, parents tend to be also portrayed as silly and unsympathetic; however, in the TV versions, the parents are warm and understanding, if not completely with it (and dads still are the voice of reason). Also reinforcing this “us versus them” image is the continued use of direct address (talking to the teen audience directly, as if adults are not in the room), the use of fantasy sequences (as in the beginning of Risky Business), and the use of intertextuality, including unexplained references to teen culture (the insider joke technique).

Finally, the hero of the teen comedy has been changed. Although the social outcast can still be found in teen movies (Porky’s, Sixteen Candles, Revenge of the Nerds), now the teen hero is as likely to be the smartest, the most technologically advanced, and the coolest character around. Ferris, in his Hawaiian shirts, is able to outsmart, and out-gadget, Mr. Rooney; Chris Knight of Real Genius turns Professor Hathaway’s house into a giant jiffy pop; Parker Lewis knows that, no matter how much trouble he’s in, it’s “not a problem”; Blossom is arguably the hippest and most mature character in her household. It is interesting to note, in fact, that three teen TV show failures of the 1980s, Spencer, Square Pegs and The Marshall Chronicles, featured misfits as the main characters, and that the mid-1970s show Happy Days did not become a huge hit until the focus of the show shifted from the square Richie to the hip Fonzie. Overall, these three alterations have made it easier to fit this genre with the stereotypical doctor television program.

As Turow points out, the medical genre also began to solidify in film before moving to television. Movie series of the thirties and forties, like Dr. Kildare and Dr. Christian, contributed the initial supplies of the genre, which were later refined in television as that medium became almost the sole outlet of the fictional medical story. In the early 1960s, the popular competitor programs Ben Casey on ABC and Dr. Kildare on NBC picked up the film contributions and added a few key features. Further solidifying the doctor genre was the wave of medical programs in the late 1960s, including ABC’s Marcus Welby, CBS’s Medical Center, and NBC’s The Bold Ones.

These cultural products shared certain characteristics that helped to define the medical formula. Overall the formula was extremely celebratory of certain mainstream elements of society. The stories were physician centered rather than focused on the patient or other medical personnel: the tele-hospital was clearly the “doctor’s workshop” (Turow). The main physician was an extremely dedicated professional, often overcoming medical, psychological, and bureaucratic obstacles to save the lives of the patient. Typically medical strategies and ethos were discussed between “the young doctor” (Ben Casey, Dr. Kildare, Dr. Kiley) and “the old doctor,” the mentor (Dr. Zorba, Dr. Gillespie, and Marcus Welby, respectively). Usually the young doctor was innovative, but immature, and the old doctor the calmer, wiser voice. The latest advances in medical technology (of which the main character was always knowledgeable) often were needed to cure the patient. The doctor movies and television programs, then, glorified the medical profession as a whole, as the rugged individualist doctor nearly always saved the day and the patient through the successful application of medical techniques and the medical model of treatment (seeing the human body as a machine to be quickly fixed). The politics and limited resources of medicine were either never shown or superficially portrayed (Turow; Alley). The herodoctors, of course, were white, male, and middle class; usually the entire cast tended to be white, middle class (Alley 1985). Occasionally, the pro-medicine message of the programs would be driven home in the epilogue, where the doctor characters would discuss, over coffee, the patient’s (usually positive) prognosis.

Other stock characters began to be developed as the genre matured. Nurses, more often than not, were young and very attractive (this caricature was solidified even more with Nurse “Ripples” in Trapper John, M.D. and Hawkeye’s various conquests along with “Hot Lips” in M*A*S*H). Patients tended to be completely passive and ignorant about their condition (Alley) or, for varied sub-plot complications, even

Doogie is part of a dedicated medical team as he copes with his patients’ traumas—and his own.
very detrimental to their own cure because of behavioral or psychological problems—i.e., “Why didn’t you tell me your mother died on the operating table?” This was labeled by one writer of Medical Center as the storyline of “the patient as his own worst enemy” (Turow 146) and helped to fortify the doctor-character’s symbolic power as the ultimate voice of authority in the health arena.

Medical shows of the 1970s and 1980s, including M*A*S*H, Trapper John, M.D., St. Elsewhere, and Quincy, M.E. solidified many of the above characteristics (Trapper John featured the young/old doctor dynamic, for example) but also slightly refined the genre and made Doogie Howser, M.D.’s successful teen-doctor combination more likely. The character of the hospital administrator, although occasionally found in the early doctor programs, grew more salient in the newer versions. Characters like Arnold Slocum of Trapper John, M.D., Dr. John Gideon of St. Elsewhere, Dr. Robert Austin of Quincy, M.E., and Mike D’Angelo of AfterMASH were bureaucratic, image-conscious medical administrators out of touch with the human and healing needs of the physicians. Often these administrators, along with the patients, would be the most significant barriers to the physicians’ completion of their duties.

Also added to the medical genre in the 1970s and ’80s was humor. Many doctor shows took on a “dramedy” tenor. Although doctor sitcoms existed before this era (Hennesey and Temperatures Rising, for example), humor, in its proper place, became more prevalent in the medical dramas. M*A*S*H may be the show most responsible for this: beginning more as a pure sitcom but ending up mixing medical drama and commentaries about war. Doctors could be fun loving, as long as the fun did not interfere with their medical dedication (it rarely did). Hawkeye, Trapper John, Gonzo, and Wayne Fiscus of St. Elsewhere had their share of cut-up moments and wisecracks.

Finally, the physician’s personal lives were perhaps stressed more than in the past. In M*A*S*H, Hawkeye wrote intimate letters to his dad back home; in St. Elsewhere, we learned about the love life of almost all of the physicians; indeed, sometimes these were the main plots of the programs (Turow 236). Given these new additions to the medical genre, as well as the changes mentioned in the teen comedy genre, the stage was set for television mutation.

Doogie as Teen Comedy/Doctor Drama

Doogie Howser, M.D. contains separate elements of both genres. From the teen realm, for example, one finds the wacky best friend, Vinnie (who often has the funniest and/or most vulgar lines, such as his suggestion that Doogie should choose as his medical specialty “Plastic surgery, specializing in breast enhancement”). Doogie’s room is filled with teenage icons, like pin-ups and silly bric-a-brac. Intertextuality is found in many episodes, including the strategic use of well-known popular music (Robert Palmer’s “Addicted to Love” plays on the radio as Vinnie tries to put the moves on his girlfriend Janine). Scenes with a music video style appear in the program: the fun that Vinnie and Doogie have while (temporarily) living on their own or on Spring Break are conveyed with quick cuts and a montage of images accompanied by a rock score.

Likewise, elements from the medi-
The combination of the doctor show with the teen show reassures the audience about the nature of medicine and the nature of teens. Doogie. The resident sexy nurse at Eastman Medical Center is Curley. Specific techniques might be borrowed from medical forms: the cinema verité of *M*A*S*H* or *St. Elsewhere* is used when Doogie has to stabilize a victim of a motorcycle accident. The day-to-day workings of the hospital are not shown, unless they happen to center on the physicians. Medical treatment is a completely limitless economic resource. Patients often create their own barriers to recovery (in one episode, for example, Curley’s father refuses to accept a pacemaker because his wife suffered a prolonged, painful death).

But the show does not just add the elements of the two genres together. Rather, the creators of the program also combined certain elements, highlighting the concordance of the genres with each other.

First of all, several characters often serve two functions at once: one function from the teen genre and another function from the doctor genre. Central to the show, of course, is Doogie Howser, the boy genius doctor. In the world of the TV doctor, he is the sensitive, dedicated, and medically brilliant physician-hero. Doogie is the nineties Dr. Kildare. Despite his age, Doogie has an incredible bedside manner. In one episode, he makes a young chemotherapy patient accept his inevitable hair loss by reminding the patient of Michael Jordan. Doogie is also willing to make personal sacrifices (such as giving up sexy dates; living with his parents) to fulfill his oath. And he is a medical genius: he develops an “experimental” technique that saves the life of the young patient described above.

But on the other hand, he is a teen-aged hero, making him a cross between Hawkeye Pierce and Ferris Bueller (although more sedate than either). He is smart, technically gifted (like Ferris, he has a home computer), hip, wears funky clothes (as the opening credits highlight with a long shot of his outfit compared with other doctors), and thinks a lot about sex. Doogie does many of the things that a modern teen hero would do: worry about his virginity, head to Florida for “Spring Break,” go on road trips. Occasionally, he will explicitly combine his two roles, such as when he holds a phony First Aid demonstration to get his friend Vinnie some lip action. Recent changes in the two genres (the smart, hip hero in the teen genre and the addition of humor and the physician’s personal life in the doctor genre) have made the combination of characteristics less strange, and more economically viable, than it would have been in the past. Doogie is perhaps the ultimate Nintendo teen: he’s an expert at techno-medicine.

Likewise, the wise-father role of the TV teen sitcom and the older doctor role of the doctor genre is combined in the character of Dr. Douglas Howser, Doogie’s father. Both his parents are shown as being out of the teenage loop (and humor is pulled from this—such as when his parents visit Doogie and Vinnie when the two kids get an apartment on their own, and the parents are appalled by how teenagers live) but are nevertheless wise and caring. Equally important, though, is the older doctor role that Dr. Howser plays. Dr. Howser runs a Marcus Welby-type family practice. In several episodes, Doogie and his dad have conversations about medical dedication and doctor-patient relationships that are right out of Robert Young’s style guide. When Doogie is deciding whether to specialize in trauma surgery, for example, he goes to his father for advice about that track (“Maybe the question is, how are you going to deal with patients like that on a daily basis?” his father asks). When he and his dad volunteer for medical work in Central America, it is his dad who gives Doogie perspective on dealing with medical pressures.

Another character who performs double generic duty is Dr. Benjamin Canfield, the chief of services. Although not quite as cartoonish as his dual counterparts, Dr. Canfield is
the equivalent of both the bureaucratic hospital administrator and the bureaucratic school administrator. He is constantly obsessed about the public relations image of the hospital. For example, he forces Doogie to do a series of hip public service TV spots that compromise Doogie's ability to perform medicine and allows a television crew (the self-reflexive "LA Med, starring Rick O'Neill as Dr. Miles Chambers") to disrupt the hospital. Other episodes reveal his function as an obstacle to youthful fun—he is startled when the hip orderly, Ray, gives him a high five; he bores Doogie with stories about the struggles over the hospital cafeteria budget.

The way each episode ends also shows how one element can combine two functions. Right before the closing credits, Doogie sits down with his home computer and types in his computer diary his conclusions about the events in the episode. In the first episode, for example, Doogie writes, "Kissed my first girl. Lost my first patient. Life will never be the same again." Doogie's computer diary combines both the medical show epilogue (in this case, the discussion occurs over a computer keyboard instead of a coffee cup) and the direct address technique of the teen shows. Often the computer messages drive home the themes and the lessons of the episode, and are usually quite legitimating of medicine and/or the family.

In fact, the most significant combination of genre elements comes in the presentation of Doogie's themes and morals. Often, an episode will feature two plots. For example, one of the plots may be pulled from the teen genre and the other from the medical one. In the end, the two plots converge, with one providing the solution to the other. Generally, the plot with the most potential for celebrating mainstream values, feel-good resolutions, and dominant institutions (the family or medicine) is the governing resolution.

For example, the much publicized fall premiere episode of the 1991-1992 season, where Doogie has sex for the first time, illustrates this recombinant formula. The teen plot features Doogie preparing, right after his eighteenth birthday, to lose his virginity during a well-orchestrated evening with his girlfriend, Wanda, who is leaving for school the next day (the episode starts off with a fantasy sequence that is a parody of the clay scene in Ghost). Doogie is anxious about the event because he feels that people snicker at him for not being skillful in "the art of love." But getting in the way of his teen plan is the medical plot. Doogie collaborates with a doctor whose patient, Mrs. Sherman, has developed a brain condition, a "traumatic subdural hema-

toma." On a variation of the "patient as her own worst enemy" plot, Mrs. Sherman suffers psychological stress and is under the delusion that Doogie is her long-dead husband. The two plots come together when Doogie is forced to stand-up Wanda so that he can comfort Mrs. Sherman the night before her operation. Although Wanda is furious about this, Doogie goes to her house the next day while she is packing to leave. They make up, and then make love. When asked later if having sex made him feel like a man, Doogie concludes, "No, having sex made me feel more like a confused kid than before. What made me feel like a man was sitting up 'til two in the morning with that patient in the hospital." Doogie learns yet again to value medical responsibility over teen lust.

Doogie's Recombinant Ideology

In the beginning of this essay I stressed the relevance of genre for the television industry. But obviously genre is connected to cultural as well as economic issues. Ultimately, from a cultural perspective, Doogie Howser, M.D. is a show about reassurance. The combination of the doctor show with the teen show reassures the audience both about the nature of medicine and the nature of teens.

On the surface, the show is a reaffirmation of American medicine. Alley (79) argues that one of the main reasons doctor shows tend to "deify" medicine is that television does not want to present information that is too disturbing to audiences: TV producers perceive that audiences want to believe that individual physicians are heroes. Doogie serves this function by glorifying medicine even more than medical shows of recent memory. Unlike Marcus Welby or Trapper John, Doogie is only a one-half-hour program. Also, its recom-
binant nature further limits the time devoted to medicine because part of the half hour is usually taken up with the teen plot. Thus, the writers are not given much time to explain and resolve the medical plot. Because re-affirming American medicine is easier, quicker, and more of a television tradition than criticizing (especially fundamentally criticizing) medicine, Doogie's medical plots are usually very reassuring about the nature and state of health care. Doogie, or Doogie's dad, cures the patient in the twenty-two minutes of air time, either through the application of innovative medical technology or through the compassion and understanding of a healer. There simply is not enough time to explain the complexities of limited resources or medical politics, even if the writers wanted to.

One irony of this is that the eighties and, presumably, the nineties are times when American mainstream medicine is in a state of transition, as is evident by increasing government involvement ("Diagnostic Related Groups" defining medical billing procedures for Medicaid; the increased push for National Health Insurance), rising costs of medical care, and greater corporatization of health (in the form of for-profit health maintenance organizations, for example). Doogie helps to alleviate anxieties that these changes are bringing. Medicine, personified by Doogie, is still dependable.

At a deeper level, though, Doogie also reassures viewers about the nature of American teenagers. As argued above, the teen comedy took a sharp turn with the popularity of the teen sex comedy in the eighties. Although Doherty argues that teen movies, including the modern teen sex comedy, ultimately legitimizes dominant values, for many parents the possibility of dealing with a real-life Ferris Bueller is a scary proposition. The "us-versus-them" nature of this genre can be perceived as threatening or alienating to older viewers, especially. Likewise, the social context of these generic changes raises questions about the nature of teenagers for many adults. In 1989, reports of teenaged "wilding," of sexual assaults by teenagers upon the mentally disabled, of gang activity, of "skinheads," led magazines such as Time to speculate about "Our Violent Kids" (Toufexis). Many in the country wondered if teenagers are changing for the worse, and if media are encouraging this change.

Why did producers create a show that is so reassuring to its audience? Television producers, of course, want to plug into the popular. They want to create successful programs by stealing successful ideas from elsewhere. The teen sex comedy appeals to youth, a very desirable market for television, and one that ABC is increasingly targeting (Miller 26). But to adapt the new teen sex comedy for television, given the increased coarseness of this form and the social tensions about wild teens, is risky. It is risky in that the genre will not have a wide enough appeal for longevity, and it is risky in that it might anger adult viewers. And as Gitlin argues, the TV industry tends to avoid the risky: "Safety first is the network rule" (Gitlin 63). Network television has to placate mass audiences, advertisers, and affiliates. The recombinant strategy, however, helped to fulfill the safety requirement of television and the reassurance requirement of many of the viewers; the combination of the teen sex comedy with a more adult-oriented genre helped to smooth out the former's rough edges. Doogie Howser, M.D. premiered in September 1989, before any of the other teen adaptations of the new teen type: Beverly Hills 90210, Ferris Bueller, and Parker Lewis Can't Lose premiered a year.
later. Doogie, then, led the way for television.

Combining the teen genre with the doctor genre means that you really don’t have a Ferris Bueller in your living room: you have a hip, funny (but noble) doctor visiting you. The doctor genre takes the edge off the teen genre. It assures adults, including parents, that kids are okay. Here’s a teen, smart and hip, who is a dedicated physician. Here’s a kid that you would want your daughter to date. Teens still like him, but first and foremost he’s a doctor. Even if he does occasionally screw up, his wise doctor-father, in the nuclear family context, can set him straight.

Brian Rose (8) argues that when television genres mutate, it is often the result of industry imperatives (such as attracting a new market) rather than the result of cultural tensions. Taking this one step farther, the TV industry often tries to co-opt cultural tensions for its imperatives. In the case of Doogie Howser, M.D., two genres were combined to help one genre fit in with the mainstream nature of television. This example thus illustrates how TV can merge two or more genres in a way that transforms them and makes their message acceptable to the industrialized needs of television. A recombinant can help make separate genres acceptable for mass audiences and safe for the television industry.

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