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The 'all-time highlight' of German TV

Kate Connolly

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'Nothing but cooks' ... Marcel Reich-Ranicki.

Photograph: Oliver Berg/EPA

'I don't belong here among all this rubbish,' ranted the éminence grise of German literary criticism, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, as he stood in front of the nation's television industry to collect his lifetime achievement prize at the weekend. The award show's producers raised their eyebrows and dug their nails into their palms. The audience cringed, but the 88-year-old continued his angry rant against the poor quality of German television, suffering a coughing fit in the process.

He had been grateful, he said, for the Goethe prize, the Thomas Mann prize and the plethora of other literary awards that had come his way over half a century. But he could not be grateful for the highest TV accolade, from the annual German Television Awards, and was handing it back. German TV was "boring" and "full of cooks, nothing but cooks", he said.

The Polish-born writer was not, of course, referring to his talkshow, *The Literary Quartet*, which ran for 13 years and turned him into Germany's most prominent and controversial literary critic, but rather to the slew of casting shows, cheap soap operas, supermodel searches, game shows and reality shows that makes up most German television. In truth the programming is not really any worse than the fare offered by any other European country. But this is Germany, where, by law, the first duty of the state broadcaster is to educate its audience.

Increasing numbers of Germans are now refusing to pay the quarterly €53 (£41) licence fee, arguing that state TV is not fulfilling its obligations, much to the wrath of the tenacious licence-fee collecting organisation, which sometimes sends its agents round to the homes of suspected licence dodgers in the middle of the night. (Last month it even

years.)

Ironically, Reich-Ranicki's outburst has been hailed by those he attacked as an all-time highlight of German television. His outburst, said Markus Schächter, head of the state channel ZDF, was television "at its best". It attracted so many downloads on YouTube that he has now been invited back to take part in a televised round-table discussion to vent his spleen against the men in charge.

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