

Quality Television: construction and de-construction of seriality

Melanie Bourdaa

In 1992, a show began to transform the relationship between producers and fans, blurring the border between production and reception, and introduced the idea of Cult TV. This show was *Twin Peaks* created by Mark Frost and David Lynch. The show had a compelling and complex plot. Its narrative storytelling was always oscillating between dream sequences, fantasy and reality. With this new form of series, “contemporary television had witnessed the emergence of ‘must see TV’, shows that are not simply part of the traditional flow of television programming, but either through design or audience response, have become essential viewing” (Jancovich, Lyons 2003: 2). Most of all, Cult TV implied that audiences, and especially fans, use the Internet to be part of a community and share their views, theories and passions of the show. Gwenllian-Jones argues for example that cult television can be defined by a series of narrative traits that induce television-participation that- in today’s TV viewing world- leads a fan naturally to the Internet (Ross, 2008: 12). From this moment on, television series have been moving from Cult TV (even if this notion still exists) towards Quality TV, a notion that is especially broadly discussed in academia.

The notion of Quality Television is particularly linked to the implementation of three novelties that has changed the televisual landscape in the early 2000s: the setting of new rules in television production, the apparition of cable channels and the evolution of the use of new technologies in cultural practices. Actually, the Telecommunication Act of 1996 under the Clinton Administration in the United States, which intended “to provide maximum economic and content freedoms for the broadcast industry”, broke the rules of the omnipotent networks and made space for the launching of new innovative channels. As Jennifer Holt states, “the catalyst for this present industrial designs has been the striking turn in the political philosophy behind broadcast regulation over the last twenty years” (Holt, 2003: 11). A new era was born. This new era marked the rise of cable television symbolized by the HBO channel and its slogan “*It’s not television, it’s HBO*”. From its inception, HBO clearly wanted to distinguish itself from mainstream television series, and especially from network television. Mark Rogers, Michael Epstein and Jimmy Reeves call this new era the “TV III era”, packed with niche markets, consumer demands and customer satisfaction. Since this moment, HBO took risks in television aesthetics with emphasis on narrative complexity and created the standard for what media scholars describe today as Quality Television. As Jason Mittel argues, “the 2000s have been a remarkable decade of transformation in American television. New textual forms have emerged with the rise of reality television as a core genre and the pervasive spread of serial narrative across a wide range of fictional formats”. During the new years following the vote and the approval of the Telecommunication Act, innovation and bold creativity exploded on the American television and especially on cable channel and pay-per-view stations. Back then HBO was the queen channel of experimentation in narrations and storytelling with shows like *The Wire*, *Sex and the City* or *The Sopranos*. In recent

years, new cable channels arrived in the American television market and have been competing with HBO on the narrative complexity issue. I am thinking of AMC (*Mad Men*, *Breaking bad*, *Rubicon*), Showtime (*The L word*, *Nurse Jackie*, *Weeds*) or FX (*The shield*, *Sons of Anarchy*, *Terriers*, *Damages*).

We definitely know that something has changed in the way TV series are created and stories are told. We know that a new genre had appeared and that this new genre is widely discussed by scholars, by media institutions, and by TV viewers. An association of American TV viewers even exists and is called Viewers for Quality Television. They argue that: “a quality show is something we anticipate. It focuses more and explores characters; it enlightens, challenges, involves and confronts the viewers, it provokes thoughts”. Obviously, they want to defend this genre and they are the gatekeepers of this kind of storytelling innovations. But what exactly is Quality Television? What are the main components of this TV genre? Since the beginning series of Quality Television (often broadcasted on cable channels) are opposed to mainstream Television series (often broadcasted on networks). For Robert J. Thompson, who wrote a book entitled *Television’s second golden age*, “quality television is best defined by what it is not. It is not ‘regular’ TV” (Thompson, 1996: 13). Naturally, this notion of Quality television underlines a value judgment, a subjectivity that is always inherent to the definition. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe explained how difficult it was for them to make scholars accept this term and to propose this terminology in British academia, precisely for the reason that it implies a subjective argument: “even before a definition can be made almost any discussion involving quality cannot escape issues of value judgment and personal taste” (Akass, McCabe, 2007: 2). Nevertheless, the development of Quality Television on cable channels is easily understandable: series are not under the audience diktat and showrunners and producers have more freedom to create complex narratives and engaging story arcs. Cable channels always order a full season, often 13 episodes including the pilot, whereas networks first order 13 episodes and then if the show is a success in terms of audience number, they order the back nine episodes to complete the season. Producers never know if their show will be programmed until the final episode and in those conditions, it is complicated to create full and closed story arcs. Despite this value judgment, the definition of Quality Television lies on tangible and effective criteria: the series should re-work existing genres (for example *Battlestar Galactica* and space opera), they should have cinematographic and aesthetic ambitions never seen before (see *Twin Peaks*), and they should include in their story serialized narrative modes that will create complex mythologies (see *Lost* or *Fringe* for instance). Kristin Thompson, in her book *Storytelling in cinema and television*, claims that Quality Television programs include “...a quality [pedigree](#), a large [ensemble cast](#), a series memory, creation of a new [genre](#) through recombination of older ones, self-consciousness, and pronounced tendencies toward the controversial and the realistic”. It is interesting to note that the notion of seriality and complex narratives are the main ingredients of successful fictional genres, for the production which creates compelling story arcs and for TV viewers who engage in those stories, as witnessed with popular TV shows such as *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica* or *The Good wife* for example.

This relationship between production and TV viewers and especially fans, an expert and active audience, is symbolized by a tension and a balance of powers, which shift from one side to the other. Actually, seriality and narrative complexity are constructed by producers to create Quality shows that will require viewers' attention and engagement; on the other hand, these notions are de-constructed by fans thanks to their use of new technologies and their desire to fully drill into the story arcs.

Seriality, complex narratives and strategies of production

In order to understand how fans can de-construct the notion of seriality itself, it is essential to study the strategies productions set up to create a series. TV series are designed to be broadcasted every week from September to May on networks and at any time during the year on cable channels (such as HBO and Showtime for instance) with a break for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Of course, on networks, due to their history, TV series are submitted to both the diktat of the audience and advertisements that interrupt the program rather frequently. Cable channels are not confronted to this audience issue since all that matters is the number of subscriptions to their channels, i.e. how many people pay to view their programs. It is important for the notions of seriality and narrative complexity since cable channels will have more creative freedom to develop their shows and won't fear constant cancellation due to weak amount of viewers, at least for a whole season.

Since the 80's, with the apparition of such shows like *Dallas* and *Hill Street Blues*, TV shows are constructed with a multidimensional structure, which involves a main story arc and secondary narrative stories running together across the series. This is quite a revolution in the way TV shows are created. In fact, before this structural change, TV series were episodic which meant that each episode had a proper ending. I am thinking of shows like *Columbo* or the anthology *The Twilight Zone* in which each episode was independent so that TV viewers didn't have to engage in the reception every week to understand the plots. Only soap operas, like *The Young and the Restless*, *General Hospital* and so on, had an endless narrative that never closed in order to ensure continuous story arcs. As Jason Mittel states:

Alongside the host of procedural crime dramas, domestic sitcoms and reality competitions that populate the American television schedule, a new form of television entertainment has emerged over the past two decades to both critical and popular acclaim. This model of television storytelling is distinct for its use of narrative complexity as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception (Mittel 2006: 29).

American TV shows have definitely changed, incorporating complex narrative forms, creating various and entangled story arcs, in order to catch TV viewers' attention and to make them engage in the reception of the show. Boardwell, borrowing a reference from the movies terminology, coined this new genre "art television". It is interesting to note that creators with a film background have all taken part in the development of narrative complexity: David Lynch with *Twin Peaks*, Joss Whedon with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly*, J.J. Abrams with *Lost* and *Fringe*, or Alan Ball with *Six feet under* and more recently *True Blood*. They all brought a certain cachet to

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television storytelling and narration and allowed the legitimization of this new genre in progress.

It appears that the notion of seriality remains hard to define and involves different characteristics according to different authors. For example, if we follow Clarke argumentation in his article on the complex narrative of *Lost*,

critics such as Glen Creeber describe seriality as a technique of narrative structure executed over a number of episodes that promises a conclusion. In clear contrast, Angela Ndalianis, tracing the neo-baroque tendencies in contemporary television programming, follows Umberto Eco in casting seriality as the resistances of linearity and ultimate closures" (Clarke, 2006: 19).

However, according to the definition of Jason Mittel, it is quite clear that seriality and narrative complexity ensures that episodes are not closed on themselves and that story arcs should live and continue across the show.

As it most basic level, narrative complexity is a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration- not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial form but a shifting balance. Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typified conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres" (Mittel, 2006: 32)

According to Clarke, "serials, that is, programs whose narratives are delayed and stretched across episodes, represent certain challenges in the maintenance of story information at the same time that they encourage viewers' speculation" (Clarke, 2010: 125). We could wonder, since narration are now defined as complex, how TV viewers could stay engaged and more importantly what are the production strategies to make TV viewers focus on the main aspects of the show. Actually, narrative complexity surely implies that TV viewers have to remember details of the narration and of the story arcs and producers have some efficient tricks to trigger the memory of the TV viewers. One of them is the use of the sequence called "previously on" and displayed at the beginning of each episode right before the teaser and the credits. These short sequences- 1 or 2 minutes- include various elements from past episodes that will ring a bell to frequent viewers and hardcore fans and that will help newcomers catch up with the story. For example, in the episode *Juliet Doesn't live here anymore* from *Gossip Girl*, the "previously on" mentioned Nate's father, a character who was missing in action since season one and his arrest for money laundering and therefore not in viewers' minds. Since he was part of the sequence before the episode started, TV viewers assumed he would return and of course, he was part of the episode when Nate visited him at the county jail. Other little but helpful elements can be found in the narration itself, like pieces of dialogues between two or more characters that will reference past actions or plots (popular in shows like *Lost*, *Dexter* or *Fringe* for example), visual objects that already appeared at some important points in the story arcs and principles of voice over like in *Veronica Mars* in which the main character recalls details and shares them with the TV viewers thanks to this process. Narrative complexity and seriality cannot be fully appreciated without those elements, which will favor the TV viewer's memory and allow his full engagement, his digging into the story arcs.

Naturally, in this context, two episodes stand out as really important in the construction and the

success on a TV show: the pilot and the finale. The pilot, the name given to the very first episode of a show, introduces the main and secondary story arcs, the main and supporting characters, and the plots fans will engage in and follow. The finale ideally has the heavy and sometimes cruel duty of wrapping up the story arcs developed during the run of the show. The Pilot of *Veronica Mars* is a near perfect example of the beginning of a compelling story. It puts into place all the story arcs, the characters, their backgrounds and their relationships, and the voice-over narration sets the tone of the show. Likewise, the pilot of *The Shield* with its cliffhanger- Vic Mackey killing his partner in cold blood- makes fans and average TV viewers want to know what will happen next. The finale on the other hand is the episode that will often bring controversy. It is quite easy to figure out why: the more complex the show with various arcs and relationships, the more difficult it will be to tie everything up in one single episode. Recently, *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* have divided fans because questions remained unanswered due to the complexity of the stories. Two sides fought between fans who appreciated the characters more than the plots and those who preferred the plots to the characters. *The Sopranos* with its fade to black finale did not satisfy everyone because fans did not have a proper closure and were facing the uncertainty of Tony Soprano and his family's future. Finally, *The L word* ended poorly because it introduced a new story arc in the last season premiere- who killed Jenny? - that finally was not addressed in the final episode.

In the definitions I mentioned- the one from Clarke and the one from Mittel-, the concept of continuity in the stories is what matters the most, what will bring TV viewers in front of their TV sets every week to follow the plots and the lives and adventures of their beloved characters. This continuity is reinforced by cliffhangers at the end of strategic episodes, like season finales for example. This will ensure that TV viewers and especially fans stay engaged in the show and wait frantically until the beginning of the new season. Recently, a show like *Fringe* successfully managed to keep fans interested after season 1 finale (the shot on the Twin Towers in the alternate universe) and after season 2 finale (Olivia trapped in the alternate universe and replaced by Bolivia in our universe).

It can safely be said that the implementation of new technologies in fans' cultural and televisual practices have accelerated the normalization of narrative complexity and serialized shows in the United States and legitimated this new genre. In fact, now that fans know how to benefit from technological convergence and from "convergence culture" (Jenkins, 2006), seriality is often deconstructed and de-materialized.

Cultural practices of fans in the digital age

First of all, we need to understand the change in fans' cultural practices and especially what it means today to be a fan in the new television ecosystem. In an article from 1999, Bielby, Harrington and Bielby wrote that fans have special television practices that go way beyond the simple act of watching television: "to view television is a relatively private behaviour. To be a fan, however, is to participate in a range of activities that extend beyond private act of viewing and reflects enhanced emotional involvement with a television narrative". In this context, fans

can be described as devoted viewers, who will engage deeply in the reception of a show they like, and who will use new technologies and especially the Internet to be part of a “community of practices” (Baym, 1999). They are also active decoders, who will compile and collect news from their shows, in order to build an encyclopaedic knowledge. This phenomenon is empowered and spread with the creation of wikis, such as LostPedia or FringePedia that enhanced the show experience for fans and their knowledge of the stories and plots.

Therefore, in the current television environment, reception of television texts and contents for fans is not limited to the very moment of the broadcasting of the show on a channel, but goes beyond this thanks to several activities that fans express and practice within a virtual community. It can be seen as an endless circle, even a cycle, in which fans watch the episode, long on to a forum, discuss it with other members, searched for the latest news and spoilers, played interactive Alternate Reality Games related to the show, and stay surrounded by the show atmosphere.

Moreover, today, fans are more and more creative. Actually, “fans are TV viewers who not only watch a program but also write fan fictions and cultural reviews, produce fan-arts, create videos, websites, and find some other fans to talk to and share their passion with” (Jenkins, 2004). This creativity can only exist when narrative complexity is developed in a show since story arcs and seriality will favour fans imaginations, pleasures and sometimes frustrations. These feelings will be the base for creations like fan fictions for example. Fans belong usually to a virtual community in which the same passion, the same language, the same media practices and the same will to participate are expressed. Costello and More think that fans who are frustrated not to be able to talk about their favourite show with their friends and family can easily gather on special websites in order to share theories and ideas about the show. This sense of belonging is really strong among fans. Recently, I conducted a research on fans of the Sci-Fi American show *Battlestar Galactica* in order to know why fans log on to a website and use the official forum. It appears that fans of this show need to belong to a community, to discuss with other fans, to share theories and creations. This is what Internet has brought to fans: a virtual place where they can gather fast and easily with no time or space issues or boundaries. The Internet provides an immediacy for viewers who go online, creating something that is familiar – fandom.

Moreover, Henry Jenkins in “The Poachers and the Stormtroopers: Cultural convergence in the digital age”, underlines three points which prove that fans are active receptors, who use new technologies and adapt themselves to a new socio-cultural environment in order to create and redefine a language, practices, identities and values. These three points are: re-circulation, participation and virtual communities, which are at the core centre of the new television practices.

“Participation: fans can engage actively and widely in the creation and circulation of cultural materials. Virtual community: the place of the social relations where there is participation in a mediatised environment. In virtual communities, there are rules to accept and to follow. Many viewers take pleasure in the fact that they are part of a specialized social audience while also working to defend their texts as worthy of a broader social audience. Serge Proulx (2004)

states that these virtual communities possess “a social structure which reproduces certain characteristics of the face-to-face structure of society: rules, norms, sanctions, codes...” Eric Maigret (2003) adds: “Online communities are rarely without any filters in order to ensure nice interactions and to choose people with an acceptable social profile: the frame of the interaction and the representation of self, in the sense of Goffman, will help construct the social relations. Fans are not only very creative in their reception but really engage in social relations through online communities. Today, with the Internet, virtual communities are spreading, even drilling, and colonising every websites allowing fans to re-circulate their tastes from one community to another.

Re-circulation: transmission to a larger audience. Digital media allow a new relationship with media and televisual contents. TV series are now developing into transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006) and “mediacultures” (Macé, Maigret, 2005), that fans consume on different media, on different personal and mobile devices such as a cell phone, a computer, a game box, or a TV set.

This shift from passive to active viewing is particularly marked in fans’ television practices. Not only do they engage fully in complex and serialized story arcs, but they also create fans materials, use new technologies to meet in virtual communities and collect news and clues and hints which will facilitate their understanding of the show’s mythology.

To sum up this new active position from fans and the new role they have in a TV world of convergence, this statement from Sarah Gwenllian-Jones is quite effective:

from 1990 onwards, a number of television series have been produced and marketed precisely in order to attract particular microcultures and to foster within them not just regular viewers but also a high proportion of fans...Intertextuality, metatextuality, self-referentiality, story arcs and stand alone episodes within the same series, an exaggerated play of fracture and textual excess and generic interconnections with wider subcultures (science-fiction, fantasy, horror, conspiracist, ufological) are knowingly employed to seduce viewers with intense engagements with the fictional worlds and fantastic logics of cult television series’ diegesis. The wide open, producerly texts of these series appeal not so much to their audiences’ desire to be entertained as to its need to be imaginatively involved (Gwenllian-Jones, 2003:166)

Clearly, there is a strong relation between producers and fans when it comes to the creation of shows from the Quality TV genre. In fact, fans are essential in the success of the formula since producers create the show mainly for their intellectual and emotional engagement, and therefore so that their reception is extended on the Internet, with activities in virtual communities of practices. However, as stated before, fans can also break the continuity of seriality.

How fans de-construct seriality with new technologies

Fans have acquired the technical skills to participate and become active and expert viewers. They know how to use the Internet, how to write fan fictions and share them on dedicated websites (fanfiction.net for instance), how to edit fan videos and post them on interactive media platforms (such as YouTube), how to play Alternate Reality Game with the whole community. But

mainly, fans know how to engage in their shows, and practice what Mittel calls “forensic fandom”, which means digging into a show to extend the knowledge. All these new fans’ practices and engagement have helped implementing and developing narrative complexity and serialized shows.

As suggested by Mittel (2006), “using the new technologies of home recordings, DVDs and online participation, viewers have taken an active role in consuming narratively complex television and helping it thrive within the media industries”. As those new technologies appear in viewers’ homes, producers had to find a way to captivate viewers’ attention and make them want to tune in every week to follow a show. That is why complex narratives and seriality began being common structures of any American shows, from the science fiction of *Battlestar Galactica* or *Fringe*, to the teen dramas of *Gossip Girl* to the sitcoms of *How I met your mother* or *The Big Bang Theory*. Today, every show is serialized and uses a multidimensional structure that requires viewers’ intellectual and emotional engagement.

However, I think that it is essential to resituate TV shows viewing and consumption in the current context of convergence between television and the Internet and new technologies. We have entered a new television era that I call “techno-television” (Bourdaa, 2009), which comes in the continuity and completes the previous one, coined “post-television” by Ignacio Ramonet (Ramonet, 2001). This new era is symbolised by the inter-connection between television and the Internet, a deeper engagement from fans, and a spreading of social relations and links thanks to social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. This era is all the more real and tangible now since the launching of projects like Google TV, Yahoo connected TV and Apple TV and the creation of more and more connected TV sets. Concerning the importance and the rehabilitation of the social relations, fans are usually part of several social networks where they display their media tastes. These tastes are then spread across the networks and shared with friends. In this context, the “techno-television” era positions itself as a creator and maker of social links and relationships across social networks.

Actually, even if new technologies have set up the environment to develop such serialized shows, it also appears than fans are using them to de-construct the notion of seriality itself. New technologies have allowed fans to create and perform activities and they have also allowed them to view their shows differently on different media platforms: a laptop or a computer, a game device, a smart phone, and obviously on a TV set. With the implementation of the DVR and the Pilotime in the United States, TV viewers and especially fans can free themselves from the rigid schedule and the diktat of TV listings and record and collect episodes to watch them whenever they want. New technologies have mainly brought freedom to fans and especially new temporalities in consuming TV series. Today, daily temporalities, work times, leisure and family times do not have to compete and collide with media temporalities and times. Technologies such as streaming or Video on Demand give fans the opportunity to catch up with their shows usually for free on platforms like Hulu, which is only available from within the United States for now. Fans can access and watch their favourite shows at any time and enjoy multiple viewings that will,

in the end, enhanced their ability to create and dig into the shows. They possess a giant virtual video store they can enter whenever they want and thanks to which they can create their own television experience.

DVDs have introduced a new way of consuming those shows, a way that is labelled “binge viewing”. According to Derek Kompare (2006), “The DVD box set in particular, as introduced with Fox’s first set of *The X-Files* in 2000, has reconceived television series as collectible objects, fostering a new commodity relationship between television and its viewers ». Amanda Lotz analyzed how catching up with TV shows (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The L word*) in a short time changed her relationship to the material and provided her « new layers of meaning ». She advises: « The new ways of watching television are providing different ways of viewing that require more thinking about what their consequences may be for meaning making and the cultural role of television. » In this article, she emphasizes that watching series on DVDs can foster the ability to remember crucial details and continuity without any gasps between seasons and interferences from other complex narratives. This statement counters the main principle of seriality, the fact that TV shows are designed to be broadcasted every week on the channel. With the act of binge viewing, fans delete the aspects of craving for the show, and minimize the continuity between weeks and so the power of the cliffhangers that maintain the suspense, usually between two seasons but sometimes between two episodes too.

More importantly, serialized shows and complex narratives trigger fans’ creativities and will to intellectually engage in the decoding of the show. But, new technologies offer them the possibilities to concretely create new materials. With the possession of DVDs, episodes downloaded legally or illegally via P2P networks, fans will have in their hands the materials needed to favor their creativity. With these concrete and tangible objects, they can watch and re-watch episodes or key moments from a specific episodes, they can freeze the image (very useful with *Fringe* and the game “Spot the observer”), they can forward or rewind important scenes. According to Olivier Blondeau and Laurence Allard, “illegal downloading of episodes will provide fans the possibility to keep the necessary material to the deployment of their creativity. Downloading implies that it is not only necessary to be able to see movies or series, but also to have archives, steady and permanent, a true database of images and cognitive data ». Not only can fans engage deeper in the story arcs thanks to the notions of seriality and complex narratives, but they also can deconstruct this very notion and foster their creativity, develop their activities of fans. Producers create complex narrations with suspense for a weekly consumption and suitable for big hiatuses between seasons, and fans get round this creation process by buying DVDs, watching episodes in streaming or downloading them. The very essence of seriality, which is the continuity in the story arcs, does not exist anymore in this special viewing and consumption context.

A twisted relationship between fans and producers that confuse the issues on the definition of seriality itself:

As argued in this article, fans have gained expertise, knowledge and legitimacy to become more and more active and intelligent viewers. These expert viewers are able, thanks to these precise

technical skills, to dig into the narratives they like to recreate the whole experience and the whole mythology of the show and to participate in communities of practices with special collaborative activities such as writing fan fictions, creating fan videos, compiling and sharing information they will post on participatory sites like Wikis, translating for fan subtitles, being activists. Aware of this solid and active fan base, producers create and invent more and more complex narratives with a notion of seriality and continuity in them, so that fans can enjoy their television experience and try to decipher story arcs. However, in contradiction and opposition to producers' expectations, fans use new technologies to free themselves from the rigid schedule of TV planning and from the waiting gap between episodes (one week) or between seasons (several months, sometimes more). They also work to de-construct complex narratives by using binge viewing, by watching episodes via streaming, or video platforms.

It is obvious that the definition of Quality Television and narrative complexity are therefore troubled by fans activities. This is an ambiguous aspect since fans love these more and more complex, compelling and engaging story arcs, and despite this, or maybe because of this, they de-construct these shows and make the continuity embodied in seriality useless. By watching several episodes in a row, by possessing episodes on DVD or stocked in their DVR or computers, fans forget the very essence of these shows: the continuity in the story arcs empowered by cliffhangers and wait. But the ambiguity with Quality Television in the digital age resides precisely in this relationship between producers and fans, since producers have to please their main audience and create engaging and complex shows with string story arcs and mythology in order to allow fans to dig deeper and enhance the televisual experience.

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