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Technical Constraints and TV Series as the Main Narrative Genre of the Audiovisual Era

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Abstract • By enlarging the concept of literariness to the concept of narrativity, it is possible to look at narrative genres instead than literary genres. Major changes in the creation of stories have always been depending on technical constraints: epic was the main poetic genre of orality, novel the main literary genre fostered by literacy, and TV series are the main audiovisual genre. TV series are composed by a superimposition of semiotic levels (images, sounds, and texts); accordingly, they require a competent audience that is committed to a united hermeneutic effort. *Twin Peaks*, the TV series created by David Lynch and Mark Frost, is a complex narrative enthusiastically analyzed by an active fan base on online forums.

Keywords • TV Series; Narrative Genres; *Twin Peaks*

Ledizioni 

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I. Literariness and Narrativity

By the 1920s, both Roman Jakobson and Viktor Šklovskij proposed the concepts of literariness and the poetic function of language, which characterized poetic texts among other forms of verbal communication. According to the definition of literariness, every text—not only a work of art—could possess it, as long as it's defamiliarized to some degree. The contemporary concept of narrativity allows a further enlargement of the poetic field to messages elaborated on and transmitted by media other than paper or electronic texts, and not entirely made of words, so gaining audiovisual narratives full citizenship of poetic creation.

Marie-Laure Ryan defines narrativity in this way:

On one hand, narrative is a textual act of representation—a text that encodes a particular type of meaning. *The definition remains unspecific about what type of signs are used to encode this meaning.* On the other hand, narrative is a mental image—a cognitive construct—built by the interpreter as a response to the text. . . . The property of “being” a narrative can be predicated on any semiotic object produced with the intent of evoking a narrative script in the mind of the audience. (9; emphasis added)

The concept of narrativity allows to enlarge the multifaceted field of poetic genres (as called from Aristotle to the 18th century, then, from Hegel on, *literary genres*) to the multidimensional arena of narrative genres, which includes audiovisual narratives as well as literary texts, and mainly mimetic modes as well as diegetic ones.

The transition into the current audiovisual era is similar to the previous passage from orality to literacy, only that the latter involved verbal language, the former makes us wonder “whether this shift is one of degree or, more radically, of kind” (Hutcheon XIX). In the passage from literacy to audiovisuality—which we are experimenting since the invention of cinema and, more impressively, since TV provides home delivery images, and the Internet has strengthened the image-based Western diet—the narrative genres panorama has become richer and much more complex, including elementary bits of narrative such as gifs and internet memes, and also hundreds of episodes/many years long stories such as *Doctor Who*, the longest sci-fi TV series created in 1963 and still going on.

Walter J. Ong dedicated his most famous work to the analysis of the differences between orality and literacy, pointing out that the invention of the Greek alphabet and the transition from an oral/aural culture to a written based one has modified not only the way in which we shape stories but the very cognitive structure of the Western society (with a shift from the ear to the eye). As to the stories, according to Ong, their syntax has become hypotactic and their discourse analytic, redundancy has been reduced. More importantly, if an orality-based culture tends to be conservative because it has no other means of transmitting its values, a literary based culture promotes innovation and the discovery of new things. Moreover, being “conservative” in an oral culture doesn't imply that information is preserved; in fact, oral culture is homeostatic, which means that a meaning is progressively changed because there's no way to preserve it intact from one generation to another.

Literacy and the subsequent possibility of transmitting an unvaried content, thanks to the invention of the movable type by Gutenberg, has also fostered science as we know it, as McLuhan pointed out:

The art of making pictorial statements in a *precise and repeatable form* is one that we have long taken for granted in the West. But it is usually forgotten that without prints and blueprints, without maps and geometry, the world of modern sciences and technologies would hardly exist. (157; see also Eisenstein)

The pivotal shift from orality to literacy, and then the invention of the movable type, resulted in the rise of the novel form in the 17th century. Russian Formalists debated a lot on the novel form and Lukács admitted that even Petronio's *Satyricon* and Apuleio's *Asinus Aureus* are novel-like (see Strada), but the novel form is more appropriately the "modern bourgeois epic," strictly linked, as also Hegel noted, to the Modern Era European society. Marshall McLuhan has connected the invention of the movable type to the rise of individualism and nationalism in the Western world, and they are reflected in the novel genre: "printing from movable type was, itself, the major break boundary in the history of phonetic literacy, just as the phonetic alphabet had been the break boundary between tribal and individualist man" (39).

The invention and transmission of stories has always characterized the human kind (see Gottschall), and stories took in every era a different form due to the technical development at every time. The concept of narrativity allows to comprehend every kind of story conceived from orality to audiovisuality, each shaped by different techniques.

2. Epic, Novel, and TV Series

Epic was the main poetic genre of orality, novel the main literary genre fostered by literacy, and TV series are the main audiovisual genre. The shift in the communication system invests education also, being narration a vehicle of cultural instructions:

America is, in fact, the leading case in point of what may be thought of as *the third great crisis in Western education*. The first occurred in the fifth century b.c., when Athens underwent a change from an oral culture to an alphabet-writing culture. To understand what this meant, we must read Plato. The second occurred in the sixteenth century, when Europe underwent a radical transformation as a result of the printing press. To understand what this meant, we must read John Locke. The third is happening now, in America, as a result of the electronic revolution, particularly the invention of television. To understand what this means, we must read Marshall McLuhan. (Postman 145; emphasis added)

Plato polemicized with poets (see Havelock) because they filled their audience's mind with invented stories, thus underlying their educational function in a largely oral world; as Aristophanes makes Aeschylus say in *Frogs*, "a poet has to hide the evil, not expose it or teach it, because the teacher talks to kids, the poet to adults. We have to give voice to the good things" (Micunco 66). According to Havelock, Plato proposed to banish poets from his ideal society because he was fighting against their role as teachers in the oral society:

Greek literature had been poetic because the poetry had performed a social function, that of preserving the tradition by which the Greeks lived and instructing them in it. This could only mean a tradition which was orally taught and memorized. It was precisely this didactic function and the authority that went with it to which Plato objected. (Havelock 8)

Different types of society require different roles for artists—and different kinds of comprehension from the audience. Audiovisuality requires a gestaltic comprehension, which is resulting in a new cognitive shift in the Western mind, a change which has been considered negatively, for example by the philosopher Giovanni Sartori, who pointed out that television impoverishes the *homo sapiens*' ability of making sense, turning him in a *homo videns*. McLuhan pointed out how information is shaped differently by different codes (the audiovisual one vs. the written one):

In terms of other media such as the printed page, film has the power to store and to convey a great deal of information. In an instant it presents a scene of landscape with figures that would require several pages of prose to describe. In the next instant it repeats, and can go on repeating, this detailed information. The writer, on the other hand, has no means of holding a mass of detail before his reader in a large bloc or *gestalt*. (288)

Considering the audiovisual era at the same level with literacy compared to orality, we should try to embrace the recent shift in human communication and look to audiovisual narratives as the newest forms of portraying reality, adapting the Literary Theory tools to the new scenario, as Ryan suggests:

Many of the concepts developed by structuralism—for instance, Propp's functions, Bremond's modalities, or Greimas's semiotic square—describe narrative on a semantic level, and, though these concepts have been mainly tested on literary texts, they are not limited to verbal narrative. . . . Radical relativism would also prohibit what has been one of the most productive practices of narratology: the metaphorical transfer of concepts from one medium to another. (34)

TV series are the contemporary counterpart of novels: these were the “modern bourgeois epic;” those are *audiovisual novels*, characterized by a superimposition of levels—visual, acoustic and textual¹—, so becoming also multidimensional novels. But in order to obtain the status of the supposedly main narrative genre, TV series had to reach their full potential in the digital era.

3. TV: the Network Era, the Multichannel Era, the Digital Era

TV series appeared in the first years of television, in what is now called the “network era” (see Lotz): a period that goes from the late Forties to the early Eighties of the last century and that in the USA was characterized by the dominion of three national networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) and a consequently scarce supply of programs, all of which were conceived for an indistinct mass audience. During the network era, TV series tended to be episodic, and horizontal plots were avoided because episodes should be suited to be aired in any order to fill the gaps of the TV show schedule, mostly when re-aired for the so called syndication (the selling of a product to multiple local channels for reruns). The televisual medium's technical restraints (the limited ether space) deeply influenced the nature of the messages it transmitted. As Jason Mittel points out:

For decades, the commercial television industry was immensely profitable by producing programming with minimal formal variety outside the conventional genre norms of sitcoms and procedural dramas . . . with more legitimated prime time offerings avoiding continuity storylines in lieu of episodic closure and limited continuity. (32)

¹ “Film is not really a single medium like song or the written word, but a collective art form with different individuals directing color, lighting, sound, acting, speaking” (McLuhan 292).

Technical constraints deeply influenced the characteristics of TV series; in *Life After Television* the “media futurologist” (as David Foster Wallace referred to him; see Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram” 185) George Gilder observed that “Television act[ed] as a severe bottleneck to creative expression, driving thousands of American writers and creators into formulaic banality or near-pornographic pandering” (47). Also, the audience wasn’t ready for complex messages, since TV programs were often watched distractedly, and so music and sounds had to be redundant (see Rossini), while images were shot by the theatrical multi-camera mode typical of the sit-coms.

“During the Eighties, something changes: the TV series form grows wiser, becomes more ambitious and begins to be considered as an object worthy of attention and analysis” (Rossini 58). In the next phase, the “multichannel era” (1980-2000s), there were a few improvements, but

While there were plenty of good shows—and some inventive ones, like “Wiseguy,” “Quantum Leap” and “Thirtysomething”—the era was dominated by now-classic sitcoms and dramas that tended to feature attractive people solving dilemmas in 48 minutes. (Egner)

Still in 1993 the US writer David Foster Wallace wrote that

Television is the way it is simply because people tend to be really similar in their vulgar and prurient and stupid interests and wildly different in their refined and moral and intelligent interests. (Wallace, “E Pluribus Unam” 163)

With the third phase, the present digital era, television(s) became capable of great quality and complexity (see Mittel), and TV series started to be crafted by using all of their semiotic levels in order to become multifaceted narratives which requires from the audience the activation of both intelligence and memory—i.e. the two characteristics that Edward Morgan Forster considered necessary for reading a novel (see Forster). TV series as audiovisual and multilayered novels fully gained their maturity as the televisual technique improved, and authors’ mastery of the medium has to be taken into account in analyzing a new genre.²

The extremely rapid analysis so far summarized tends to highlight how technology contributes in shaping those “horizons of expectations”—as Jauss called them—we call literary genres, and how these horizons are widened in the audiovisual era. Contemporary TV series, supposedly the mature outcomes of this narrative genre, are crafted in order to require from their audience a vast range of competencies in order to make sense of every semiotic level which carries its own meaning and which interacts with the other levels.

David Lynch and Mark Frost’s TV series *Twin Peaks* constitutes the most significant example of an audiovisual narrative which requires its viewers’ active cooperation not only as singular spectators but also as a community committed to a hermeneutic effort.

3.1. *Twin Peaks* and the Maturity of the Audiovisual Genre

Twin Peaks is a TV series which may be considered a game changer, and it fits T.S. Eliot’s definition of a work of art:

² In television authoriality is deeply different from both literature and cinema. Jason Mittel highlights that for literature there is an authoriality by origination (a single author is responsible for everything we can find in a text); for movies an authoriality by responsibility (the director coordinates various people), whether for TV series there is an authoriality by management, in which a large number of constraints have to be taken into account mostly by producers (see Mittel 87-88).

what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the completely new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art towards the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (23)

At its debut in 1990, during the “network era,” David Lynch and Mark Frost’s *Twin Peaks* aired on the broadcasting channel ABC. Even before its airing, *Twin Peaks* was saluted as *The Series That Will Change TV*, as Howard A. Rodman’s article on *Connoisseur*³ was titled. *Twin Peaks* achieved resounding success and earned Lynch a *Time* cover, the *Entertainment Weekly*’s main title *The Year’s Best Show* and a growing audience—that was, obviously, ABC’s first concern and the main reason for having financed a risky project involving the bizarre director of *Eraserhead*. As Mark Frost noted in 1990,

It’s amazing that no one thought to do anything like this until fairly recently. I think that now the networks are so concerned about losing their audience they’re willing to take these kinds of risks. I don’t know that we would have been able to sell this series three or four years ago. (Rodman 142)

Nevertheless, *Twin Peaks*’ first two seasons suffered from some constraints. After the first season’s finale in 1990, there was no clue on the resolution of the detective story, and ABC pressured the series’ creators to solve the mystery and finally reveal who had killed Laura Palmer. As Mark Frost recalls:

David always felt we made a mistake early on, giving in to heavy network pressure to solve Laura’s mystery as soon as we did. I agree with him now. We let their fears become ours and it cracked the magic. The dream would have lasted longer, most likely, if we’d stuck to our guns. (Frost V)

Twin Peaks’ plot, as a detective story, was based on the “whodunnit” mechanism, and the ABC producers thought that “who” killed Laura Palmer had eventually to be discovered, in order to positively influence audience rates, since they had been falling during the first season, due to ABC’s bad move of scheduling the show on Thursday night, in direct competition with NBC’s beloved comedy *Cheers* (see Carter).

As a consequence of the network pressure, during the second season’s eight episode, Laura Palmer’s murderer was revealed. Not only audience rates did not grow (the show placed 85th in the ratings out of 89 shows), but also, immediately after the airing of the 15th episode of the second season, the series, now aired on Saturday nights, was put on hiatus, to return for the last six episodes and not being renewed for a third season. After the forced revealing of Laura Palmer’s murderer, many storylines had become sloppy and weirder. As he was on the set of *Wild at Heart*, Lynch was no longer directly involved in all aspects

³ *Twin Peaks* did change TV: “In the decades since [*Twin Peaks*’ Nineties seasons], networks and cable channels have continued producing shows directly or indirectly influenced by “*Twin Peaks*.” Many of those series ran longer than “*Twin Peaks*” itself, perhaps because they effectively isolated its more mainstream elements and put them at the center. Just by trying out so much that felt new and inspired, the show’s creators, Mark Frost and David Lynch, inadvertently spawned an array of TV subgenres that have been called “*Twin Peaks*”-esque. Like the following: *The Serialized Murder Mystery*. . . . *Everyone Is Eccentric*. . . . *Small Town, Big Secrets*. . . . *The Paranoid Thriller*. . . . *The Mythology Series*. . . . *The Art Show*. . . . *Pulp Fantasies*” (Murray).

of the development of *Twin Peaks*, therefore the quality of the episodes' scripts changed. "Season 2 is widely regarded as an absurd derailment of the show's excellent first season, a campy affair that has long been ridiculed by critics" (Desta). Lynch directed only season 2's first two episodes and the finale. He largely blames the show's original network, ABC, for ruining the second season: "It got very stupid and goofy in the second season; it got ridiculous", Mr. Lynch said. According to the *Times*, Lynch "was not involved with the show after Laura's killer was revealed" (Desta).

Twenty-six years after the second season's finale (in 2017, during the digital era), *Twin Peaks* returned for a third season on Showtime (a premium channel subscription-based television service) from May 21st to September 3rd 2017.

The time was ripe for creating an audiovisual narrative without any constraints—except for the unavoidable aging and passing away of some actors.

David Lynch directed all the third season episodes, and is accredited as sound designer as well. As a Renaissance man-like author (see Wallace, "David Lynch"), Lynch masters different semiotic codes (he is a musician, painter and author of comic strips) and is capable of crafting an audiovisual narrative that relies on the superimposition of various levels.

3.2. A Multilayered Structure: Sounds and Images

Sounds have always played an important role in *Twin Peaks*; in her essay "Disturbing the Guests with This Racket": Music and *Twin Peaks*," Kathryn Kalinak spotlights various examples of intradiegetic music that seems extradiegetic and vice versa, a feature which tends to blur the fiction/reality border. In the third season, even more so sounds are part of the narrative; for instance, the same peculiar crackle can be heard in the first episode (during which The Fireman warns: "Listen to the sounds") and in the last, when Cooper travels back to 1990 and saves Laura Palmer; that sound seems to punctuate the shifting of the timeline, thus becoming a full-fledged part of the narrative, like colors and film editing. Instead of using frame composition, cameras and film editing only to record a scene in which facts and dialogues make the story go on, David Lynch—whose hand seems much more visible than Frost's in this season—makes images and sounds become fully part of the narrative, each conveying a particular meaning.

As for the colors, one of the numerous alter egos of Dale Cooper's in the third season, Dougie Jones, is characterized by pastel colors (he wears an apple-green jacket and yellow trousers) that suggest his manufactured nature, while his wife Jane-E wears red shoes, one of the several references Lynch makes to (the film adaptation of) *The Wizard of Oz*. Black and white images are signals for other levels of reality, as in Gordon Cole's dream in which Monica Bellucci (as herself; Cole is played by Lynch himself) says: "We are like the dreamer, who dreams and then lives inside the dream." Otherworldly places are also characterized by peculiar colors and film editing: The Black Lodge has a geometric black and white floor and red tents, and the characters that live there move and talk in a reverse backward which connotes them since *Twin Peaks*' first season. In the third season, there are also a White Lodge (filmed in black and white, with the same reverse backward feature as in The Black Lodge) and a Purple Room surrounded by a purple sea in which the character Naido has frantic movements and speaks an incomprehensible animal-like language. The Convenience Store is filmed in black and white, its editing is quickened, glitchy and with disturbances and grating resonances; here the soundtrack is a shrill violin sound. The scenes set around the Convenience Store are intermittently lightened, which results in a disturbing experience for the viewer.

Demanding a cognitive effort that stretches and exacerbates the concept of interpretative cooperation theorized by Umberto Eco, *Twin Peaks – The Return* is a complex narrative mechanism that can be only partially understood, being shaped around a Möbius strip

(which is shown in Part 17), thus compelling the audience to re-examine clues and trails from the beginning of the story, twenty-seven years ago, when *Twin Peaks* imposed itself as a game changer even being burdened with several constraints.

The complete authorial liberty granted to David Lynch in making *Twin Peaks*' revival enabled the creation of a narrative that fully exploited the semiotic possibilities of the televisual medium, thanks to the multitude of channels and streaming platforms currently available. The possibility given to the audience to create personalized show schedules freed networks from the obsession of aiming at an indistinct mass audience. The audience's fragmentation fostered the network inclination to finance shows which could be appropriate for niche audiences.

Twin Peaks' third season's ratings, even if not good, not only weren't producers' first concern, but couldn't be the sole meter of judgment for the show's success.

3.3. A Complex TV Series and Its Audience

Instead of using the Netflix distribution mode, that involves publishing a whole series' season at the same time, allowing the audience to binge-watch all the episodes, *Twin Peaks*' creators chose to release it weekly, thus expanding the storytelling duration and, accordingly, audience's enjoyment and cooperative efforts in making sense of the story.

In order to try and place events and scenes in what could be the right place in space and time, the audience has to take full advantage of the hints positioned on various semiotic levels; these are not given as "flashing arrows" ("They reduce the amount of analytic work you need to make sense of the story. All you have to do is follow the arrows" [Johnson 74]). On the contrary, they are hidden, which triggers the audience's hermeneutic fervor on various Internet platforms and networks, such as Reddit.⁴ David Lynch's well known obstinacy in refusing to give any explanation to whichever of his works fuels his audience's will to get to the bottom (or on top) of the entire mystery.

On line communities' hermeneutic work was pivotal since *Twin Peaks*' first life on ABC. The Convergence theorist Henry Jenkins dedicated an essay to the on line forum alt.tv.twinpeaks, highlighting how *Twin Peaks*' fandom base discussed every episode and used VCRs in order to accurately examine the show frame by frame in search for clues ("Whitin moments after an episode is aired, the first posts begin to appear, offering evaluations and identifying issues that will often form the basis for debate and interpretation across the following week" [Jenkins 53]). The same interpretative attitude characterizes the airing of the third season, with several discussions on Reddit and on Facebook⁵ groups, and web sites dedicated to an interpretative effort and the publication of essays and theories.⁶

Blamed for fostering hyper-simplification and serving as a crucible for the basest forms of entertainment, the televisual medium has instead proved itself much more flexible than initially thought as a communication technology, with the growth in the number of channels offering increased space for superior programming. TV series have become the main narrative genre of the audiovisual era during television's digital era, and they are one of the most interesting fields of study in contemporary narrative.

⁴ See www.reddit.com/r/twinpeaks/.

⁵ See *Twin Peaks: Between Two Words*, www.facebook.com/groups/twinpeaks2017/?ref=br_rs; *Twin Peaks LogPosting®®*, www.facebook.com/groups/1528224180819917/?ref=br_rs; and *Twin Peaks: The Return: The Discussion Group*, www.facebook.com/groups/734030413446556/.

⁶ See www.25yearslatersite.com.

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