GRAAT On-Line #15 April 2014

Foreword
Television Series and Narratology: New Avenues in Storytelling

Georges-Claude Guilbert & Shannon Wells-Lassagne

As Erich Auerbach so clearly demonstrated in his analysis of the flashback caused by Ulysses's scar in *The Odyssey*[i], literature has long acknowledged that storytelling is crucial to the success of the story being told. Many have followed in Homer's footsteps. Lawrence Sterne's writings famously flaunted the dangers of taking anything for granted when it comes to narration, calling our preconceptions of the realism of traditional literary devices into question. Later, Gustave Flaubert showed us that the way you tell a story could actually be more interesting than the story itself, while the twentieth century abounded with narratively treacherous authors like Vladimir Nabokov, Marguerite Duras, John Fowles, John Barth, Martin Amis, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon or even Bret Easton Ellis, who will never let us even conceive of a reliable narrator again.

Of course, this narrative innovation is not relegated to the exclusive domain of literary fiction; popular culture has consistently appropriated this insistence on storytelling for itself. In literature, Philip K. Dick's novels and short stories have come to be renowned for their thematic inventivity, as science fiction filmmakers acknowledge their debt to Dick in recurrent tropes of the genre, from deceitful androids that pass as humans to alternate realities which utterly fool you. What is perhaps less widely acknowledged—but just as crucial—is the author's narrative innovations, from the third-person stream-of-consciousness narration of *A Scanner Darkly* or *Valis* to the evocative descriptions of the dying environment of Earth in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's celebrated "Time

Passes" passage in *To the Lighthouse*. The films he inspired find different ways of echoing Dick's accomplishments, with varying degrees of success, but the recent television series inspired by literary science fiction, like *Quantum Leap*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Lost*, or *Flashforward*, which demonstrate a canny understanding of narrative complexity (as well as the science fiction tropes created by Dick, Kurt Vonnegut, Frank Herbert, and others), prove that now television, one of the most recent forms of popular culture, has scriptwriters who know how to use that trove.

This same transposition of narrative innovation from literature to screens small and large can be found in the increasing popularity of the reflexivity that has become characteristic of postmodern fiction. Thus, teen and horror movies (notably slasher movies) have lately become immensely self-reflexive, *Scream* I to IV being excellent examples. Teenagers have been brought up on such products, and a critical distance based on their vast experience of those genres is indispensable to their enjoyment. These days they turn to teen series that follow the same patterns—the latest case in point being *Teen Wolf*, which is deceptively simple.

However, to simply associate television with its film and literature counterparts—or suggest that it is simply tributary to the innovations of its more established fellows—would be to vastly oversimplify the specificities of television narratives. The *New York Times*'s Adam Kirsch and Mohsin Hamid wondered last February, "Are the New 'Golden Age' TV Shows the New Novels?" Instead, this issue of *Graat On-Line* is attempting to discern the unique nature—and the intriguing solutions—to narrative complexity in television fiction. What we do here is take as a given that American shows have been constantly evolving in recent years, and their quality greatly improved; rather than being a mindless pleasure, series have become a source of aesthetic and intellectual stimulation, inciting audiences to repeated viewings and endless analysis in order to better understand their layers. By becoming more and more diegetically complex, they create the new avenues in storytelling we mean to explore, trusting our readers to have long come to the conclusion that television series are a worthy rival to novels in terms of narrative interest.

After all, television has been considered a visual medium that writers continue to dominate, as opposed to cinema, where directors / auteurs tend to hold sway over

writers. For reasons that stem notably from the burgeoning industry of screenwriting seminars and screenwriting handbooks, rising attention has been paid to the art of narration in television series, whose very structure matters more and more: showrunners like Dan Harmon (the creator and showrunner of *Community*) expose their Propp-like schematics of episode-writing to an avid audience, while the Sundance channel has followed in the footsteps of Orange's documentary series *Showrunners* with its own documentary series on television writers, *The Writers' Room*. Indeed, this last example highlights one of the peculiarities not just of television writing, but of the American television production model in particular, where the traditionally collaborative writing process of American television series contrasts with the *auteur*ist vision of television present since David Chase and *The Sopranos* became a household name. Delphine Letort's article, "From the Control Room to the Headlines in *The Newsroom*," addresses the new emphasis on reflexive storytelling as it appears in celebrated showrunner Aaron Sorkin's latest television outing. By using well-known tropes of television fiction in its denunciation of infotainment, Letort suggests, Sorkin calls to mind his own career as creator and showrunner of *The West Wing*, creating certain expectations in terms of both political discourse and convincing storytelling in the viewers (like *The Newsroom*, *The West Wing* famously used a fictional universe to denounce current politics). Ultimately, however, by using an evening news program as a setting, Sorkin's latest series is unable to purge itself of fictional tropes, and so participates in the same tendency toward the fictionalization of current events that it sets out to denounce: the reflexive nature of the series is greater, perhaps, than its creator intended.

This emphasis on the writerly nature of the television series, the newfound celebrity of the showrunner, who is often head writer and producer all in one, has led to new requirements for the narrative structure of television fiction. One of the ways television shows have evolved in recent years is in their attention to their beginnings and endings, be it the generalization of the cold open, or the arresting efforts now being made to truly *conclude* series rather than have them simply end. It is the latter issue that Florent Favard explores in "The Yellow Umbrella Syndrome: Pledging and Delaying Narrative Closure in *How I Met Your Mother*," where the popular sitcom not only promised a definitive ending in its very title, but structured

its episodes with recurrent avatars of this deferred closure. This obsession with endings is evocative of television's current landscape, where showrunners proclaim varying versions of long-term planning to guarantee maximal narrative cohesion, but *How I Met Your Mother* must deal with the attendant problems of such a claim in a television form, the sitcom, traditionally devoted to protracted storylines and narrative stability rather than narrative evolution. In another vein, Sarah Hatchuel examines how the short-lived but innovative series *Awake* navigated the vagaries of pilot and season finale episodes in the wake of the show's uncertain future: how does one satisfyingly end a season and perhaps a series simultaneously? In "Writing the Beginning and the End of a Mobius Strip: Dreams of Starting Anew in *Awake*," Hatchuel asks if a series where the main character finds himself first unable, and then unwilling to distinguish between dream and reality, ultimately makes it impossible for narrative closure to occur, defusing the obligation for a definite ending.

These efforts to more coherently begin and end the narrative framework must be seen in contrast to contradictory efforts to open fictional universes onto different media platforms. Transmedia storytelling makes it fascinatingly difficult to define boundaries between the diegetic world of the series and the universe in which the show is set. To take but two examples, what is one to make of efforts like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Seasons Eight and Nine, in comic book format (Dark Horse Comics), and *Castle* titular character Richard Castle's Nikki Heat books appearing in bookstores? Actor Nathan Fillion actually tours bookstores signing Richard Castle books, causing the reading and viewing public to question where diegesis begins and ends. In keeping with the recurrent problem of seriality in television studies, the relationship between series and other storytelling platforms echoes the continuity problems encountered from one episode to the next, on a larger scale. In the continuing saga of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the series joins other franchises like *Star Trek* or James Bond in attempting to distinguish between what is and is not canon. To creator Joss Whedon, the Buffy of Seasons Eight and Nine is the same Buffy, drawn rather than filmed; but if the post end-of-the-television-series comic book is canonical, how should we read the previous comic book Buffy, who existed at the same time as Seasons One to Seven, was published by the same company, and sometimes crafted by the same artists? Indeed, the very genesis of the series becomes

problematic, as the various story arcs of the Buffyverse have occasionally clashed, starting with the original movie (to say nothing of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Season 8 Motion Comic*). This is an incongruity seemingly voluntarily echoed in more recent series like *Hannibal* or *Bates Motel*, where the series make a point of distinguishing themselves from their written and filmed predecessors. Without necessarily decrying infidelity to the source text, the complex relationship of *Buffy* comics to their television predecessor, like the recent series prequels of *Psycho* or Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon* (and its film adaptations), appear to both adhere to the precepts of their predecessors and to complicate those previous texts immeasurably by playing with their timelines and characterizations.

The Emmy nominations announced on July 18, 2013, were unusual in heralding not only the best and brightest in television, but also the storytelling innovations that television has been showcasing in recent years. By nominating *House of Cards*, Hollywood acknowledged the changes in the way television is made, packaged, and enjoyed: the serialized narratives that have become relatively standard in recent years no longer require the viewers to pencil in a viewing every Thursday. There was a time when all viewers could do to quench their thirst for the antics of Alexis, Brenda, or Valene was to "tune in next week." Now they can wait for a few weeks, buy the DVDs and watch an entire season. And if they are repeat viewers, they do not have to wait for reruns. If they enjoy decent Wi-Fi equipment they can opt for streaming. If, Thor forbid, they are criminally predisposed, they can download episodes illegally. The fact that Netflix's *House of Cards* responded to these new habits of viewing by making the entire first season available in a handful of seconds on February 1, 2013, on the VOD service, brings the complexity of seriality to new and vertiginous heights. Unquestioningly, VOD has changed the world. Obviously marathon viewing does not turn a season into a very long movie. Instead, today's television writers seem to be attempting to satisfy all types of viewers, be they old-style weekly viewers, voracious binge viewers, or obsessive repeat viewers. As a result, increasingly complex narratives are required to adapt to these different forms of viewing as well as to satisfy sustained and / or repeated viewings. Even the traditional structure of writing in acts and its perpetuations has clearly been called into question: one need only look at premium cable offerings, where commercial

breaks are no longer an issue. Matthew Poland attempts to show the complex nature of seriality, both its gaps and its consistency in his article "Full of Wholes: Narrative Configuration, Completion, and the Televisual Episode / Season / Series." By examining much-lauded television series *Mad Men*, Poland seeks to show how the viewers are constantly reinterpreting meaning in relation to preceding episodes or seasons, and how the demands of seriality may ultimately outweigh authorial intention.

Structure is also called to the viewers' attention through the increasingly complex frame narratives and voiceover narrators that pile up levels of narrative distance. One could posit that the return of the often sardonic narrator, from *Sex and the City* to *Desperate Housewives*, has created an ironic distance from the diegesis, while today's convoluted recourse to analepsis and prolepsis enrich television narratives, notably in shows that involve time-traveling, thus literalizing flashbacks and flashforwards. In "It's like *Groundhog Day*: Remediation, Trauma, and Quantum Physics in Time Loop Narratives on Recent American Television," Michael Fuchs examines the way science fiction television series like *The X-Files*, *Fringe*, or *Supernatural* have utilized the premise of time loops to examine the way that television narrative itself is structured: the *mise en abyme* of repetition with variation within and without the episode underline showrunner concerns with the possibilities that serialized narrative offers writers and audiences.

This evolution, on these many and varied fronts, is what prompted us to edit this issue of *Graat On-Line* and solicit the papers of our five contributors. We present this issue in the hope of pinpointing some of the many ways that television seeks to capture our attention, to surprise us and to prompt new ways of telling (and understanding) a story. The time is appropriate to reexamine the narrative strategies employed in what is undoubtedly a new golden age for American television. With this selection of articles we hope to contribute usefully, if modestly, to the ever-developing field of TV series studies.

---

[i] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis : The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), Princeton, NJ : Priceton UP, 2013.