Television Series as Mirrors of Contemporary Life

Television Series as Mirrors of Contemporary Life

By

Ligia Tomoiagă

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Television Series as Mirrors of Contemporary Life

By Ligia Tomoiagă

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-3399-9
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3399-8

Thank you Mara, Teodora and Mihai,
for being my inspiration,
and explaining your young world to me.

CONTENTS

SHORT INTRODUCTION

I became interested in popular culture as an academic domain in time, as I was trying to keep in touch with my students' interests, likes, and dislikes and to be able to communicate with them and understand their references. One of my students told me that it was not their fault that parents and professors did not know what they talked and cared about; it was the parents and the professors who did not care to learn and become literate in youth culture.

Popular culture and youth culture have many points of intersection, one of these being television.

Television serial films provide much of what we call everyday entertainment, especially for adults, but also for young people, who can watch these shows not only on their television set, but also online. For quite a few years now I have tried to watch all the shows recommended by my students, as well as a few others, and I have used those shows in my literature courses as well as in the courses on British and American history and culture. I have discovered that they can be a good starting point, they can be used to illustrate certain aspects, they inspire students to go further in their reading, etc.

Even if my initial interest in television series was that of keeping 'in sync' with my students, in time I also developed an interest of my own and started thinking about the grammar of these shows, trying to discover the recipe of what makes a good television show. As my main academic interest resides with the study of literary genres and how they are still relevant even in postmodern times, television series helped me take a glimpse at what genres mean in television and how television series are reflective of the importance of genres in today's popular culture. When we speak of series, we will automatically refer to them by their category, the genre they belong to.

I have also grown fond of television series in terms of the quality of writing which they display, and I started to follow some of the main writers of the public's and my favourite shows. To do research in the domain of writing for television series is an enormous undertaking, as there are so many

exceptional writers, who can not only come with intelligent and inspiring stories, side stories, and characters, but can also work in teams, can adapt to the reactions of the public, can add new dimensions to their stories and characters.

Another aspect in the creation and distribution of television series which surprised me very much was the institution of the television critic, which in America is taken very seriously. Trailers are seen by everybody, but prominent critics, those who have columns in the most significant magazines and papers, or the most influential bloggers are invited by the television stations to preview the first episodes of their new series and recommend them to the public. The verdicts these well-known critics give are very important, and television stations are careful to not underestimate their impact.

These are the coordinates of this study on television series: their storylines, the writers contributing to the stories, the novelty these bring, the genres they represent, and the manner in which critics have received them. I have watched many series, but there are obviously many I have not watched. I enjoyed some more than others, or I noticed the importance of some such series in the development of their genres or in bringing new ideas. Consequently, I tried to make a selection of series which is illustrative of the history of their particular genre. Also, the series which are discussed within these pages are mostly the ones that impressed by the stories they told, the characters they created, and the way they reflected new attitudes and mentalities. Almost all the series that are discussed are American, as my students initially recommended only American series, and as I think that British series need to be taken separately. Still, some of the American series are transpositions of the original British ones in America, sometimes with much greater success – and that, despite the fact that they compromised the quality of the original to a certain extent.

There are a few categories and genres which are not dealt with here as this study will, hopefully, be followed by a second one, which will deal with exactly those series that do not fit the scope of our current research.

CHAPTER I

THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT! A SHORT HISTORY OF AMERICAN TELEVISION SERIES

Without us even knowing, let alone acknowledging, it, television series have accompanied our lives for decades. More or less, they have become our daily mirror for what we call contemporary mentalities and fashions; they have become one of our most beloved pastimes, and have fulfilled a social, as well as an aesthetic, role, at times. Many of us have created our own style inspired by the characters in such series; many of us have dreamt or imagined countries and geographies according to what was presented in these shows.

We have laughed and cried with our favourite characters, we have admired the intelligence and courage of so many detectives and spies, we have hated the villains and pitied the innocent victims, we have tried to emulate the superheroes and force our imagination into outer space. Nevertheless, it is not sure whether many of us admit how important TV series have become for us, and it is even less certain whether we have stopped for a while to look at such expressions of popular culture in terms of their role in proposing and enforcing values in our lives.

We try to prevent our children from spending too much time in a virtual, digital environment, we tell them about the risk of not having a real social life, but only a 'virtual' social life; we try to motivate them to leave their mobiles, iPods, iPads, laptops, or PCs aside for a while every day, telling them that these would hurt their brains and eyes and that spending your life in total slavery to gadgets of all kinds is not a good choice. After we do that, we return to our couches to watch our favourite serial films, or serial reality shows, or serial talk shows, etc., etc. The hypocrisy of such an attitude is evident to anyone: there are only few people who can really say they do not live in an environment in which they use technology. We live in a post-body era, in which the mouse, the mobile, and the remote have become parts of our 'natural' bodies.

What are TV series for critics of Cultural Studies, or just critics of Culture? That is one very easy question to answer: there is no criticism of today's cultural phenomena in which television – television series included – is not taken into account. To go on with a vision of culture in which popular culture plays no role, or is ignored deliberately and somehow dogmatically, is rather risky as, in the US – as well as all over the world –, popular culture not only reflects popular beliefs, mentalities, and behaviour, but also inspires such beliefs, mentalities, and behaviours. Most people today in US and Europe, at least, were born in a 'wired environment', they knew reality from television much before they could have any first-hand taste of reality, they saw trees and animals on television much before they could see them in the open:

> For me, television is organic. It was more "there" than the trees and rivers themselves in the world into which I was born. To reject it out of hand would be historical voyeurism; a kind of bourgeois nostalgia; even nihilism. Would the boost of self-image be worth the loss of my past? If I do not make my past usable, it will continue to use me. The critic born after World War II is born with television, yet everywhere he is in blinders. To confront television has become merely the refusal to deny nature. Television awaits its Wordsworth who can skip through its wavy woods making sense of its light and dark. (Marc, 1987:4)

The very concept of TV series starts from the hypothesis that there is a need of the viewers to compare their lives with other people's lives, and do that in a nondramatic manner, in a safe environment – their comfortable living rooms –, without feeling the pressure social life sometimes carries with it. It is somehow tiresome to meet friends, admire their lives, or careers, or looks, and then compare yourself with them, as these social encounters put a certain pressure on you. You feel compelled to notice these people, to tell them how you feel, to praise them for what they have accomplished, and sometimes, when doing just that, you might also become aware of your own lack of accomplishments in those particular areas. It is much easier to feel admiration for characters in a TV show, to be able to imagine yourself in their shoes, to hope that one day you might become as brave, or beautiful, or accomplished as they are, but not experience the pressure of actually having to compare yourself to them in real terms. It is also easier when the characters in front of you are nothing but comic or grotesque, because in a real-life situation it is much harder to face such instances – you cannot just burst out laughing at the comic situations you see when other, real people are involved. Oh, but you can laugh at home, and such laughter is therapeutic to the highest degree.

We have fun, and we find watching television series relaxing; sometimes, their characters are the only company we need after a hard day's work:

> Of course, we all use television to relax. Many people, who tire after a day of working at computers, talking and texting on cell phones, and using all kinds of digital gadgets, just want to sit in a comfortable chair to watch television and relax. We laugh at the comedies and watch crimes get solved. Even shows that would not seem to be relaxing, such as the grisly *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* or *Criminal Minds*, comfort us because we see good triumphing over evil. (O'Donnell, 2013:1)

Popular culture has become an important phenomenon of contemporary times as a consequence of the development of technology, but for many of us it also represents a complementary source of information about the world besides the bedtime stories of childhood. For some, whose parents do not read bedtime stories, popular culture is the only source.

It is clear that at the very beginning of the 20th century, and then especially after World War I, radio was the most important communication technology that facilitated access to the music of the times, to popular shows, and started most of the trends in technology-dependent popular culture categories. The radio also broadcast dramas, plays, all kinds of series of a comic or dramatic nature; it also started broadcasting the American vaudeville, or the burlesque shows. Then, in the '50s and the beginning of the '60s, with the enormous impact of television – in just a few years, television became the most important piece of technology in everyone's home –, popular culture started to revolve around television broadcasting. The next step was satellite technology, which allowed access of virtually all people around the world to television programs:

> …the spread and appeal of pop culture throughout the globe today is due to technology – most importantly, satellite technology. Satellite technology has had profound social, political, and cultural repercussions. Satellite television, for example, is often cited as bringing about the disintegration of the former Soviet system in Eastern Europe, as people became attracted to images of consumerist delights by simply tuning into American television programs. (Danesi, 2008:22)

For the past century – in broad lines –, we have acknowledged the fact that culture is dependent on technology – in fact, the manner in which culture makes use of the newest discoveries in technology – and the manner in which those who develop technology especially in the field of communication do nothing but highlight this interconnection and interdependency, prefigured and explained by Marshall McLuhan in the second part of the

20th century:

> As the late Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) often claimed, culture, social evolution, and scientific innovation are so intertwined that we hardly ever notice their interconnection. Some inventions become so intertwined with trends in pop culture that they morph into symbolic artifacts within that culture. (Danesi, 2008:22).

In his study, *Popular culture: Introductory Perspectives*, Marcel Danesi goes on by exemplifying this metamorphosis with the jukebox and with the automobile, which became such 'symbolic artifacts'.

Television started as entertainment that came to mimic, first, and, then, replace entertainment, which used to be provided solely by the dancehall and the cinema. The cinema of the '40s changed dramatically in the '50s with the widespread of television; many cinema halls were closed or, if not, changed their profile, now comprising a cinema, a dance floor, and some restaurant or bar, to offer the 'night out' that people expected (Chambers, 2002:111):

> When a cinema was converted it often became an 'entertainment centre', incorporating a cinema, bar and dance floor. And it is the concept of 'entertainment' that most significantly marks the change in social habits involved in the demise of the cinema. This change arises with the popular establishment of television in the late 1950s as the privileged screen. Its dailiness, as opposed to the exceptional, the occasion, the 'night out', introduced a completely new dynamic into visual entertainment and pleasure. (111)

Some critics of popular culture, which is often seen as a minor expression of our need for aesthetic values in our lives, count television somewhere even lower than other forms of popular culture, as - they say - such shows address people who somehow do not want to use their intellectual ability to do more than just watch simplistic shows. More elaborate critiques come to draw the line between various genres of TV series, showing the superiority of some in comparison to others.

The talk about TV series revolves around genres, generally, and such a discussion has become very popular, taken for granted by most TV guides, Internet listings, and magazine articles. Iain Chambers himself, in his 1986 study, starts the history of television series – referring to British series, but the demonstration holds true for any such history – with a comparison of genres. After considering the momentum of television in the mid-fifties and its natural inclination towards offering home 'entertainment' – contrasting it, as I have already mentioned, with the 'going out' entertainment

–, he also shows that the cinema started leaning more towards the exceptional, the extraordinary stories, while television series had that quality of 'dailiness' that people enjoyed in their homes:

> ...the principal organizing category in everyday television is 'light entertainment'. At peak viewing times this will involve *The… Show* format organized around a show-business personality, the 'star' […] Richard Dyer has suggested that such shows offer an 'aesthetics of escape'; an escape into a 'world in which necessity and scarcity have been defeated', but where the audience is also invited to participate in the domestication of the spectacle and have 'a good time' for the next forty-five minutes (Dyer, 1973). With their stable 'show biz' perspectives on sexuality, glamour and entertainment, these programs offer a rather nostalgic style […] But the popular audience, the pleasures of 'the people' who regularly watch these and other programs, remains the enigma inside the formula of 'entertainment'. The shifting form of the crime series represents another avenue into this universe. […] It is not by chance that this shift is accompanied by a change in the focus of policing and crime and increasingly spectacular subjects: we move from the corner policeman and local station […] through the policing of a town […] to the 'war' against organized crime (the 'firm') in the metropolis. […] Another, this time more stable, referent is that of the long-running 'soap opera'. Here, across a relatively fixed ecology of principal characters and contexts, change and novelty tend to be charted by more transitory personalities. (115)

Television series genres, though, are rooted in the classic genres of literature, much debated upon in certain moments of thought and artistic development, neglected in other periods, taken for granted, or denied entirely. A generic approach to literature has almost been a blasphemy in our postmodern times, but there are researchers in the field of genre studies who still venture to show that such modes of telling stories are nothing but the natural modes in which humanity has been telling their stories for millennia, and if narrative techniques might change, if the way we envisage trends, styles, authorship can change and have changed dramatically, genres are still valid categories, carrying not only the conventional canvas of the story, but also much of its aesthetic interest. More often than not, when asked about our likes and dislikes in terms of television shows, we will answer not by naming titles of shows, but the entire genre.

In his 2004 study, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, Jason Mittell argues that television genres are cultural genres rather than textual categories.

> This book offers a television-specific genre theory and argues for the continued importance of genre in organizing televisual practices. Specifically,

> I contend that television genre is best understood as a process of categorization that is not found within media texts, but operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts. I draw this theoretical position from a cultural studies perspective that focuses on a circuit of cultural practice operative in multiple sites, instead of a singular realm of textual criticism or institutional analysis. Thus, genres can be seen as key ways that our media experiences are classified and organized into categories that have specific links to particular concepts like cultural value, assumed audience, and social function. (xii)

In this way, as the author points out, such genre categorizations are more fluid, they can adapt to how the audience react to these cultural instances and influences, thus,

> ...[situating] genre distinctions and categories as active processes embedded within and constitutive of cultural politics, pointing to how media engage with and shape our culture, and how underexamined facets of media, like genres, matter. (xii)

Obviously, genres of textual tradition – in literature and film – could apply to television as well, but Mittell argues that there is a need to look at television genres separately, especially as the issue of authorship is much different – several producers and writers contribute to the same show – and as the interaction between authors and viewers is closer, more intense, and more relevant (xiii-xiv). Nevertheless, as with genres in literature and film, any dogmatic view, any expected 'purity' is inadvisable: the mixture of genres is as much part of the literary tradition as it is of today's culture. Even though viewers of television 'talk genres' (Mittell, 2004:94), there is a lot of mixture in the area; genres are fluid, they change, they mix, sometimes showcasing this exact mixture (series such as *Ally McBeal,* which are comedy-dramas). Moreover, there are shows that are parodies, in which genres – as cultural traits that influence viewers greatly – are mocked at, somehow commenting on both their limits and the limits of the audience. Mittell refers to *The Simpsons* to exemplify this parodic treatment of genres (2004:153).

The impact of television series on the viewers has been notably increasing in the past decades, which led to a policy of serialization in the domain of television shows, and not only, as there are important confirmations of this trend in other fields of popular culture. Thus, producers noticed that viewers were very affected by the fictional world presented on the screen with its self-sufficient story (as in serializations of certain literary works – let us remember the beautiful TV series produced by BBC based on Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* or other such Bildungsroman serial films, which ena-

bled producers to make a serial of each chapter of a book). In time, nevertheless, even though such serializations did have their enthusiastic public, viewers wanted something else, they wanted to be taken aback by the story, which had to twist and swirl around their most beloved characters. Novels were not enough anymore, the public wanted fresh stories, and they also pressured towards the prolonging of those stories in more and more seasons. Sometimes, the – most important, most watched – serial film season's finale is more important for people, and more expected, than their own lives' events. In a way, this is a cultural replication of Dickens's times, when readers expected him to come with more and more interesting serials in each instalment in the magazines and journals in which he would publish his novels before their publication in separate volumes.

Marcel Danesi counts the most significant characteristics of popular culture, which seem to account for its powerful impact on people. He speaks of *spectacle*, that is, the powerful entertainment quality of popular culture – all types of shows, be they musical, theatrical, sports, shopping, films, flash mobs in our times, as well as all kinds of protests that view popular traits, they are all sources of entertainment. Like most popular culture historians, Danesi considers that popular culture is rooted in the *vaudeville* (2008:27), which, as a genre, comprised a mélange between the theatre, music, ballet, comedy, spreading of the most popular gossips and rumours about actors, all kinds of entertainers, etc. The most famous vaudeville actors were the ones used by the cinematographic industry as well as the radio and, later on, television networks. Then, *collage, bricolage*, and *pastiche* are employed to describe how popular culture entertainment shows of all kinds (we use the term *show* in the broadest meaning possible) come to characterize not only the products of pop cult, but also everything connected to them – producing, writing, lifestyle, etc. (Danesi, 2008:30).

Collage refers, of course, to the manner in which the elements of these shows are arranged in order to create a wide range of effects.

By using *bricolage*, a mixture of genres and effects related to other arts or references to literature in a vast juxtapositioning of themes is made possible, whereas *pastiche*, as one of the most important means of postmodern culture, refers,

> to an admixture of elements in a work or spectacle intended to imitate or satirize another work or style. In my view it is this term that best describes the character of pop culture, which is essentially a pastiche of spectacles, fashion, fads, and other accoutrements that together give pop culture its distinct character. (Danesi, 2008:30)

The next characteristic that Danesi finds to describe pop culture is *nostalgia*. Today we notice a tendency not only to watch and re-watch the same shows and films of people's youth – a tendency which started as a consequence of so many television stations that needed to fill their broadcasting time and started looking at the history of television –, but also towards a reconsidering of the same themes, a remaking of older stories, a renewing of certain films and serials which were very popular in the past. Sometimes, critics consider that this is nothing but lack of inspiration on the part of present-day writers and producers. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the reasons why people like pop culture are mainly emotional, and such a revival of old genres and themes does nothing but appeal to this nostalgic angle which most viewers have in appreciating popular culture.

The following term that Danesi uses to characterize popular culture is *genres*. It is easier for viewers to 'tune in' if they know what the show is going to be like, so producers of all kinds of popular culture events and shows make it clear what kind of show or performance theirs will be in order to attract the 'right' set of viewers in the audience. Another reason why genres seem to be almost impossible to give up in popular culture is the fact that most performances have sponsors, who, coming from the production of certain goods and services, need to know what kind of viewers watch certain types of shows in order that they prepare the most convincing ads for those types of viewers.

The last term in Danesi's list is the *audience* (34), which speaks of nothing but who are the most typical people to be attracted by a certain genre, or category of performance. This sociological study will give producers very much to think about as they need to attract as many spectators as possible; it is their best interest to aim performances at certain groups of viewers – the more, the better, though. This is why, as Danesi shows, the observer of today's television will speak about *narrowcasting*, since the aim of the producers is, at times, very strictly perceived (34).

Another view on popular culture brings into discussion the way in which this concept goes 'hand-in-hand' with the concept of 'everyday life'. In a sense, serial films – as part of popular culture – do nothing but mirror the everyday life of a large category of people – who belong to various professional, age, or profile groups. Everyday life, in itself, seems to be the root of the serials, but, as argued before, it is also the reflection of these serials, they having been intersecting and interinfluencing each other since the beginning of the category. This common view on everyday life and popular culture is the hypothesis of John Storey's book *From Popular Culture*

to Everyday Life.

> Like popular culture, the everyday has tended to carry mostly negative connotations. As Michael Sheringham points out, 'Everydayness is more or less exclusively associated with what is boring, habitual, mundane, uneventful, trivial, humdrum, repetitive, inauthentic, and unrewarding' (2006: 23). To live an authentic and exciting life we have to escape the everyday, much in the same way as to produce culture we have to reject the popular (Storey 2003). But is this really true? It could also be argued, and sound just as convincing, that the everyday includes the extraordinary, the wonderful, profound sorrow and profound joy, love, and sacrifice, politics and poetics. It should not, therefore, like popular culture before it, be seen as a residual category, the place for human experience once we have removed the beautiful and the sublime. What is certain is that everyday life has been made to carry many different meanings, many different ways it can be articulated and used. (2014:3)

Serial films, though, did not remain at the surface of interest, rooted in everyday life – be it more or less dramatic and spectacular –, nor did they remain at the level of simply mirroring everyday life and 'normal' viewers. As with any kind of art, serial films created a certain category of fans that started interacting with their shows, enlarging them, demanding new shows, in a continuous quest for more fiction that brings entertainment and joy to their lives.

Quoting a study by Henry Jenkins written in 2006, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, John Storey makes a summary of the ten ways in which television viewers become, themselves, producers and rewrite in a way the television shows that they favour. Some such ways are *recontextualization*, *expanding the series timeline, refocalization, genre shifting, crossovers,* and *character dislocation* (Storey, 2014:45).

By *recontextualizing*, the viewers of a series try to make up for the lost or unknown parts of the stories, to complete narratives or find certain motifs that the producers of the initial show did not provide. Thus, there are books written after the show, or short stories, even blog entries, which come to clarify such aspects, authored by writers, critics, or even average viewers. In their analysis, both Jenkins and Storey consider the expanding of the series timeline as a manner in which the said short stories, or novels, or vignettes that explain the series come to take the story further on, after the actual narrative of the series stopped (Storey, 2014:45). The suggestions that the audience give for how the story could be continued are very often material for the spin-offs of the serials, of franchises – in which the characters are taken to new adventures, keeping their name and statute while confronted with new situations.

In these shows, sometimes, *re-focalization* is also a factor, as, according to 'public success', some characters, which are secondary, appear in the foreground; they take a central position. Such postmodernist techniques of rewriting and re-contextualising the story are very productive especially in the production of television series.

Genre-shifting is referred to by Jenkins and Storey as a taking over of certain characters from a genre and using them in other genres – the example Storey gives is of science fiction narratives, which are redistributed in romances or Westerns (2014:45). *Genre shifting*, though, has been especially productive in the sense that the same story in a film was, later, used by a television series; or a television series with humans was transformed in a cartoon series; or a Western, into a musical; etc.

Genre-shifting and *crossovers* – in which the character in one show is introduced in another – have also been fruitful in the creation of new shows, which were meant to be successful from the very beginning due to the experience the producers have already had with the public of the initial shows, or of popular culture forms (to think of a more drastic crossover, in which characters in comics, for instance, have been taken over by television producers). More or less, with genre-shifting and crossovers we have also touched the *character dislocation* dimension, which the two critics also mention.

Serial films had an increasing effect on viewers, who started loving their favourite series passionately, sometimes even fanatically. In order that a series film create such an effect – all the artifacts, the Internet discussions, interviews, magazine entries, articles, jewellery, fashion, and toys are proof for such effect –, it is also necessary that the series should create a world that makes sense, in which everything is established in a pattern that cannot be mistaken for another, the viewers have to feel the need not only to watch the series, but also to be part of it, to influence the happenings, to relive the story and, maybe, feel what the characters in the series feel. That is the manner in which television series become 'cult objects', as Umberto Eco showed in his essay '*Casablanca*: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage':

> The work must be loved, obviously, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world, a world about which one can make up quizzes and play trivia games so that the adepts of the sect recognize through each other a shared expertise" (198, quoted in Stoddart, 2011:7).

Intimates of serials do use sentences and retorts of those serials. There are aficionados of all genres, who are pros at recognizing their favourite type of show, character, context, and can read in the intertextuality and mixed references of such stories on TV.

Serial films provide viewers with more than just stories; they give them other points of interest. As already mentioned, viewers are interested in characters in such films more than in the story proper. They want to identify with the characters, they want to identify their friends, their co-workers, their neighbours and acquaintances, they want to laugh at certain characters and admire others, they want to feel included in the story or only listen to the opinions expressed by them; they want to feel the excitement of new adventures. Nothing novel here, some might say, Bovarism has new clothes, and people who read texts just for the story ("in fabula', as Umberto Eco put it) existed before the serial films and will continue to exist in the future. Characters are more important in serial films than in literature or the cinema, as Mittell argues:

> Even as television writers, directors, and actors focus much of their energies into creating fully realized characters and designing plots and storyworlds around them, academic analyses of storytelling have focused far less on issues of character than on other narrative elements such as plot, world-building, and temporality. This oversight is especially true for moving image media such as film and television, where character tends to be taken as a self-evident given, wrapped up into conventions of performance and stardom, rather than analyzed as a specific narrative element. (2015:118)

As 'identifiable fictional beings with an inner life that exist as communicatively constructed artifacts' (Jens Eder, quoted in Mittell, 2015:118), series heroes have become the main attraction of television series, most viewers considering that a well-realized character is the clue of the show. Characters in television very often make actors famous, especially if they somehow remind the viewers of their former 'fictional roles', or, on the contrary, if the new roles are entirely different. Actors are 'sites of intertextuality' (Mittell, 2015:122) as they carry traits of their former characters, they are seen as real people behind the screen, and sometimes give viewers parallel versions of themselves – they appear in more shows at the same time or they appear at the same time in shows that were made in different decades owing to how television stations reprogram old successful series all the time.

People like to tell stories and be told stories – television serials have become 'bedtime' stories for the entire family; a short survey of what people

watch could tell volumes about the interests and fears, likes and dislikes, mentalities and behaviours of contemporary society. This is what television series – as well as television entertainment – have brought to our lives. Obviously, besides the entertainment effect and the close relationship with the characters that is established, viewers will forever look for a good story.

Good stories are always attractive, not only because they answer our superficial need to pry into other people's lives, and gossip, as some might think, but also because they answer one of our most intrinsic needs: the need to clarify the mystery, to be witnesses to the moment when the positive characters are rewarded and the villains are punished. We need round stories, which are told in a convincing manner, in which we can address our innermost fears and hopes, in which we can find answers to what we consider the most important clues of our lives; or, at least, to be given the opportunity to be empathic and feel good about ourselves.

Other stories give us the chance to demonstrate our psychological insight, or our deductive qualities, as well as our intelligent observations.

The need to cry is also important, and, as our lives tend to be more and more impersonal and social requirements tell us that we are not supposed to show our emotions in public, a good cry in front of the TV set might make us feel better.

The same can be said about a good laugh, especially when we laugh at people we feel superior to. Sometimes, a great story gives us the thrill our lives seem to lack or the romance we seem to find less and less in our relationships. These stories that serial films tell are not too long (not more than 50 minutes of our days), so they are easy to manage and easy to fit in our daily schedules. A little bit of drama, some intricate story of psychological depth, a few minutes of sheer enjoyment, some spicy comedy with a sprinkle of sarcasm, a cup of criticism of moral values, a short insight into political manoeuvres, some beneficial exposure to what the future of technology can bring us – all these are provided in the few minutes of our preferred serial films every day.

> Television is a cultural mirror, but it is also a two-way mirror in that it not only reflects our culture but also illuminates and influences how we see ourselves and others. Social science researchers have produced hundreds of studies regarding the influence of television on viewers. Whether viewers' behavior and/or attitudes are changed is not the primary concern of the television critic; however, the critic is an important observer of the content of

> television programs who can help us understand why such influence may occur. (O'Donnell, 2013: 13)

In other words, the long debate on whether television influences the viewers or, on the contrary, general beliefs and behaviour appear on the screen as a reflection of what happens in society, cannot be reduced to a simple answer; obviously, the process is ambivalent, it goes both ways, and sometimes critics can pinpoint such inter-influencing issues.

What is new? In the past ten to fifteen years a lot has changed, as television started to become more than television – with the aid of post-network technologies, all shows, be they serial films, entertainment of any kind, music, documentaries, etc., started to have a new life, outside the moment when they were initially aired.

In a study dedicated to this 'television revolution', Amanda D. Lotz explains the phenomena that took place, which determined this new aspect of the media and especially of television. Thus, the invention of so many digital devices – DVRs, DVDs, and various other kinds of portable devices – allowed people to view their favourite shows at the most convenient moments, did not tie them to the time of broadcast, did not ask them to program the VCR, and gave them the possibility to watch the shows anywhere, anytime. Thus, television became 'convenient'.

At the same time, with the advent of mobile phones and the Internet, television stations can be watched everywhere, or almost; this way, people can simply switch their devices on and watch their favourite shows – and that has made television 'mobile'.

The third characteristic that Amanda Lotz highlights is what she calls the 'theatricality' of television:

> Additionally, technological advancements in audio and visual quality – many of which resulted from the digital transmission of television signals – expanded the *theatricality* of television until the distinction intended by the word, as in of real life or perhaps film quality, became insignificant. The emergence of high-definition sets as replacements for the long inferior NTSC television standard particularly contributed a technological revolution in the quality of the television experience. Digital transmission alone allowed some enhancement of television's audio and visual fidelity, but the high-definition images in particular appeared as crisp as reality and offered the detail available on film. (Lotz: 50)

I would add to this aspect of theatricality the fact that, besides the technological enhancement of television, the existence of digital devices, the Internet, Facebook and Twitter, the effects of the series – as well as of other television programs – facilitated that television programs be prolonged; all kinds of forums, online debates, discussions, arguments, etc. made a show more or less popular, according to the number of people participating in such discussions. Thus, television stations became more interested in these online expressions of ideas, in the way millions of people interacted with the shows, commenting on the actors and the storylines, than in what critics or journal commentators had to say. Considering how the fight for a share in prime time is the most important issue for television networks and their programs, this brought about a new vision on such shows and led to a phenomenon which seemed impossible before, at the beginning of the Internet, when many critics predicted the death of television.

> Each of these attributes of post-network technologies – convenience, mobility, and theatricality – redefined the medium from its network-era norm. Their significance results from the considerably revised and varied uses of television that consequently have emerged and that contrast with the unstoppable flow of linear programming, the domestic confinement, and the staid aesthetic quality of the network era. Rather than these technological assassins causing the death of television, as many writing about television in the mid-2000s claimed, the unprecedented shift of programming onto tiny mobile phone screens, office computers, and portable devices ultimately reasserted the medium's significance. The new technological capabilities also required adjustments in television distribution and business models in order to make content available on the new screens. (Lotz: 51)

Little by little, television series, with their stories, their characters, their inner jokes and outer glitter, created a whole new world of paratextual instances. The fight for success, for prime time, for audience is so fierce, those networks, as well as the post-network industry, have been focusing not only on creating the best shows, but also on marketing their shows to the best of their abilities.

As Jonathan Gray puts it, there is a 'media world' that surrounds us and that could only be understood by those who know the references, the figures, the actors, the tunes that form this paratextual culture of everyday life. It does not function as a parallel world but as one which is part of our lives as much as the 'real life' is part of our life – if there still exists something that can be called 'real life'.

> On any given day, as we wait for a bus, for example, we are likely to see ads for movies and television shows at the bus stop, on the side of the bus,

> and/or in a magazine that we read to pass the time. If instead we take a car, we will see such ads on roadside billboards and hear them on the radio. At home with the television on, we may watch entertainment news that hypes shows, interviews creative personnel, and offers "sneak peaks" of the making of this or that show. Ad breaks will bring us yet more ads and trailers, as will pop-ups or visits to YouTube online. Official webpages often offer us information about a show, wallpaper for our computer desktops, and yet more space for fan discussion, thereby supplementing the thousands of discussion sites run by fans or anti-fans. The online space also offers the occasional alternate reality game or particularly creative marketing campaign. Stores online and offline sell merchandise related to these films and shows, ranging from collectible *Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003) "replica" swords or rings, to Dunder Mitfflin t-shirts for *The Office* […], to a talking Homer Simpson bottle opener. They sell licensed toy lines, linens, breakfast cereals, vitamins, and clothing to children. Bookstores and comic book shops sell spinoff novelizations and graphic novels. Game stores sell licensed videogames and board games. Fast food stores sell the Happy Meal or Value Meal. Music and video stores sell soundtracks, CDs of music "inspired by" certain films or shows, and DVDs and Blu-Ray discs rich with bonus materials, cast and crew commentaries, and extra scenes. Tour companies offer official *Sex and the City* […] or *Sopranos* […] tours of the New York area, while *Lord of the Rings*-themed tours of New Zealand are possible, and some fans lead themselves on their own tours of filming sites. Fans also write stories and songs and make films or vids about or set in film and television's story worlds. Film and television shows, in other words, are only a small part of the massive, extended presence of filmic and televisual texts across our lived environments. (Gray, 2010:2)

I have chosen to give this long quotation not only because Gray's style makes the whole scene so vivid and brings this entire familiar phenomenon in front of our eyes, but also to show the amplitude of the phenomenon, the 'bottom of the iceberg' of what we may call the world of television today, in which the shows themselves are just a little part. They are accompanied by these paratextual instances, which play a crucial role in the way we appreciate popular culture, generally, and television series, particularly. They accompany our everyday life, and the paratextual load will also accompany us during our entire day. Television series do not just appear on the screen, without being announced. On the contrary, there is much expectation, typically, as there are trailers, interviews, announcements that precede the show. Then, after the finale, or even during the running of the show, toys, games, artifacts of all kinds are released on the market – even bed sheets, towels, T-shirts – all of which have become *part of the show* (Gray, 2010:48).

Stories themselves have changed dramatically in the past fitly to sixty years. If we compare *Bewitched*, a serial of the '60s, telling the story of an American couple with all the ideal 'suburban bliss' and 'gray-suit – beautiful housewife' normality, and the story of a couple in the '90s, such as *Dharma and Greg*, in which the couple come from and go on an entirely different path, we may see how much stories have developed.

Truly, serial films mirror changes in mentalities, in society, in the outlook people have on life; sometimes we may be thrilled and astonished at the extent to which some things have transformed. Amanda Lotz wrote two books that can shed light on another type of change, as she looks at the roles of women and men in serial films, on television, and shows how much gender roles have changed.

Starting with the mid-20th century, with the still-lingering-on image of a Victorian 'angel of the house', the mapping of women's ideals and quests, of their struggle and victories, has made many of the best producers concentrate on such issues. In a way, this could be the best lesson for our children when they tend to either consider everything as just served on a silver plate or, on the contrary, believe that there is nothing they can do to change things. In her demonstration related to women-centred television series, Lotz shows that, at the beginning, even if powerful and resourceful, women had to appeal to their sexuality and secure the aid of a man in the end. They were not empowered; they were not self-sufficient; the mentality of the public was not ready for such an approach.

It was as late as the '70s that a few dramas appeared, in which the main female character could do on her own, without the aid of a man – Lotz gives the example of *Charlie's Angels, Wonder Woman*, and *The Bionic Woman*, considering, though, that even in these instances, the partner, the man, still appears at the 'right' moments (2006:3). Still, as the author argues, it is only with the female cops of the '80s (starting with *Cagney and Lacey* in 1982, followed by *Murder, She Wrote*, *Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman*, etc.) that they finally started giving women a central role, without having to 'pair' them in their path to success and achievement. It is important to see that this kind of change is not necessarily a feminist victory as much as it is a victory of society itself – the series doing nothing else but mirroring these changes.

Nevertheless, the real sea-change in the female-centred dramas only emerged in the '90s, with protagonists who were deep, interesting, and convincing.

> The arrival of all these dramatic series – with their empowered and fantastic action heroines, depictions of single career women, flawed yet authentic professionals struggling with family commitments and occupational demands, and even the continued success of characters depicting a more traditional femininity – indicates unprecedented possibilities for female characters and audiences, as these diverse series exist and succeed contemporaneously. Cable networks specifically addressing women expanded programming targeted to female audiences during this same period. (Lotz, 2006:3)

This is the moment when cable networks saw the extraordinary opportunity that rested with female-centred series and created the female-centred cables as well. The 'for women' programs started to expand and flourish – which takes one back to the glorious period of the novel in the 19th century and its large female readerships in the age.

> The value of the female niche has not gone unnoticed; Oxygen Media joined in the competition in 2000 as an integrated Web and cable media brand targeted to women with an edgier, more irreverent sensibility; and Rainbow Media re-launched their female-skewing Romance Classics Network as the Women's Entertainment Network (WE) in 2001. Lifetime also repackages its films on a second cable network, the Lifetime Movie Network (LMN), and it launched Lifetime Real Women (LRW) in 2001, a channel designed to specialize in reality programming. (Lotz, 2006:3)

The same happened in all the countries. The 'female niche' represents a very important part of the integrated cable and network market, which makes producers more and more attentive with how they represent women.

Starting from the mild and fun romance-adventures of the '80s, some television serials about women have arrived at a very different point, showcasing themes and events unimaginable ten years ago, let alone earlier. Such heroines, like the main character in *Weeds*, the irresponsible, drug dealing mom in the suburbs, or the not beautiful, plus-size, smart and funny, fashionable woman in *Drop Dead Diva*, or, even more, almost the entire variety of characters in *Orange Is the New Black*, would have been unimaginable formerly.

Gender roles, though, did not change only when it came to women. As Lotz argues, men's roles also benefited from feminist victories. More serials started being made about men in this new 'arrangement', about how they cope with a world so different in terms of gender roles, how they need to cope with new roles (the role of a father, of a husband, of a coworker, etc.) when the entire gender paradigm has changed.

Television serials have benefitted from such themes very much, especially in male-centred shows, because many of these shows try to escape a new type of stereotyping and show a diversity of contexts and situations, matching the true diverse reality that we live in today.

> Instead of providing the easy image of reconfigured gender relations often offered by broadcast dramas, the male-centered serial narrativize the process of working though discontentment with and uncertainty about contemporary gender scripts in a constructive, but not unproblematic manner. The series feature protagonists unsure of how to be men and of what is expected of them in a society substantially different from the worlds of their fathers. The men make missteps, but stories construct their situations as complicated and avoid the once-common trope of blaming women and feminism for unmooring men from the gender scripts and cultural privileges of the past. (Lotz, 2014:14)

Many serials are a reflection of this non-dogmatic view on the gender 'switch', the ones Lotz mentions – women-centred and men-centred –, but even those which have family relations at their core, or workplace relations, have changed under this new vision on gender roles. Some traits that used to display all kinds of stereotypes and mannerisms have changed, which made television serials more realistic, more diverse, giving more opportunities for unexpected solutions.

So far, we have looked at serial films in their historical development, as entertainment, in terms of their generic differences, in terms of their themes, their reflection of reality, of technical advancements and media of transmission, of their representation of gender roles.

There is one more thing that has preoccupied critics for a very long time: what makes good television? Janet McCabe and Kim Akass edited a very interesting collection of essays on the subject of quality in television, entitled, *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (2007), in which they gave many scholars the opportunity to try and make this distinction between what is quality and what is not when it comes to television.

The first essay in the collection, 'Is Quality Television Any Good? – Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgment', written by Sarah Cardwell, deals with one of the most difficult issues in the field: is quality television good television as well? What makes good quality television? Is there a difference between good quality and just good television? The author starts from a response she had received

from one of her students, who watched a series that he considered good quality, but he also added that it was 'boring' – which, in a way, means that it was not good television, either. This is really intriguing, as people very often watch programs which are obviously made with the uttermost care, professionally and artistically; they feature good actors, they are well-directed, yet these shows are not likeable. What makes television likeable? Cardwell arrives at the conclusion that good television has 'stylistic integrity' (2007:30) and it is television which 'we experience positively' (2007:31).

> …[good television has] to be coherent at the level of *stylistic integrity*. In good television there is a high level of synthesis and cohesion between stylistic choices and the programmes' 'meanings'. The way a camera moves, the moment at which a cut is made, the choice to frame a character in mid-shot rather than close-up, the use of a cello rather than a violin on the soundtrack: each of these stylistic choices can be found, upon repeated viewing, to be coherent with the programme as a whole and the moment in which they are contained. Further, the 'meanings' that may be drawn from the programme – the experiences and reflections with which they provide us – enable us to regard our lives slightly differently, especially in terms of the relationship (of whatever kind) between the physical and practical elements of life and the ideals an ideas that are not customarily visible but that are nevertheless determining. […] Good television is television that we *experience positively*: we find it engaging, stimulating, exciting, original and so on. […] So, good television, though constituted by textual features that open up the potential for rich, repeated viewing, requires something special for its classification: it requires the subjective experience of an appreciative viewer who feels something towards it. Unlike quality television, we cannot simply categorise good television on the basis of a cursory viewing; we must experience and respond to it. (Cardwell, 2007:30-31)

For the sake of this study, I will ask my reader to put the daytime dramas aside for a while and concentrate only on such serial films as prime-time dramas, detective and crime stories, sitcoms, science fiction series, superhero stories, historical serial films, evening dramas, and cartoons. These genres are reflective not only of the need of the viewers for stories, or for model-characters, but also for identifying the most important questions of their lives, for moral values, for validation of their own beliefs, for spokesmen and spokeswomen of their social and political convictions, and, last but not least, for spotting changes in mentalities. In the further chapters and subchapters, I will try to address these points of interest in the short interpretation that I am going to give to a sample of such serial films as mentioned above, concentrating mainly on the story, on the narrative, on the development of the technique of the writers of television series.

Those are writers who need to come up not only with intricate and compelling stories, but also with situations that exemplify these stories best, and with characters that attract the public and offer versions of interpretation of our urban environment, with all the changes and novelties which have occurred since the beginning of television.

Television series mirror these changes in views and ideas; they also fulfil the viewers' need to look back at other times in awe, or with a nostalgic feeling. Therefore, the writers of such series must come with very good and verified data, with a good story, with situations and retorts that the public will remember, and with a dialogue which sounds intelligent, convincing, but natural at the same time. A mirror means that people can identify with both the story and the characters – which is the case with present-day dramas, thrillers, or sitcoms – or they want to look in a magic mirror that might allow them to project themselves into other times and places – in historical series, or in science-fiction ones, or even in vampire stories.

Whatever the interest or our love for television series, the writers of these shows are extremely important: they initiate and imagine a world, and they translate it for us in innumerable stories. Interestingly enough, the developers, creators, and writers of television shows are half-anonymous. Although critics and commentators almost always give the names of the creators of the shows alongside with the names of the producers and directors, more often than not, the public forgets these names. Some might argue that this is what popular culture does – it has another understanding of authorship, closer to traditional oral cultures. Then, most such shows have many contributors to the screenplay: some are specialised dialogue writers and some are storytellers. Whatever the reason, these writers rarely enjoy the kind of fame that writers of literature do. Nevertheless, their contribution to our contemporary like for stories on the silver screen or on television is immense, and they deserve a closer look, a more attentive criticism, and appreciation.