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Mirrors of Contemporary Life:  
Television Series

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## 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 role as well as an aesthetic one, at times. Many of us have created our styles inspired by characters in such series; many of us have dreamed or imagined countries and geographies according to what was presented in these shows.

We have laughed and cried with our favorite 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 are trying 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 just a 'virtual' social life; we try to motivate them to leave their smartphones, iPods, iPads, Laptops or PCs aside for a while every day, telling them that these would hurt

Re their brains, and their eyes, and that this is not a good choice: to spend your life in total slavery to gadgets of all kinds. After we do this, we return to our couches to watch our favorite serial movies, serial reality shows, or serial talk-shows, etc. etc. The hypocrisy of such an attitude is evident for anyone, as 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 answer to give: there is no criticism of today's cultural phenomena in which television – television series included – are 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 risqué, as, in the US – as well as all over the world – popular culture not only reflects popular beliefs, mentalities and behavior, but also inspires such beliefs, mentalities and behaviors. Most people in the 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 with their own eyes, etc.

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 non-dramatic 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, their careers, or their looks, and then compare yourself with them, as these social encounters put a certain pressure on you. You feel obligated to notice these people, to tell them how you feel, to praise them for what they have accomplished, and sometimes, when doing just this, you might also become aware of your own lack of accomplishments in those 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 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 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 technologies, but it also represents for many of us a complementary source of information about the world besides the bedtime stories of our childhood. For some, whose parents do not read bedtime stories for them, it is the only source.

It is clear that at the very beginning of the 20th century, and especially after World War I, the 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, theatre, 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 –the television became the most important piece of technology in everyone’s homes in just a few years; after that, 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 today 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 technologies especially in the field of communication do nothing but highlight this

inter-connection and inter-dependency, 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).

Marcel Danesi goes on in his study *Popular culture: Introductory Perspectives*, 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 that used to be provided solely by the dance and cinema. The cinema of the 40’s changed dramatically in the 50’s with the widespread of television; many cinema halls were closed, or changed their profile, 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

Rest 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 with others.

The talk about TV series revolves around genres, generally, and this discussion has become very popular, taken for granted by most TV guides, Internet listings and magazine articles. Even Chambers, 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-50's 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 that 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 television 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, genre can be seen as key ways that our media experiences