

TELEVISION STUDIES – OCW UC3M

Topic VI. Television Institutions and Authorship

Outline:

This topic will address the institutional framework in which television texts are produced and the influence that these elements have in the process of creativity. In this sense, we will establish an interconnection between political economy of communication and media landscapes. The first part of the topic will deal with the professional figures who assume primary responsibility of television creation. Tracing the evolution of the concept of authorship from the so-called *la politique des auteurs* to the new collaborative frameworks, we will define the importance of television producers, writers, director, actors, studios and production companies and other areas in which we can identify aspects of authorship.

In the second part of the topic we will analyze case studies in which we can trace the importance of contextual frameworks in the analysis of TV works, focusing on careers whose longevity and consistency allow us to identify authorship features. We have chosen the trajectories of writers, producers and directors such as Steven Bochco and Narciso Ibáñez Serrador in the context of the configuration of television systems of the United States, the United Kingdom, Latin America and Spain, respectively. Content regulation, changes in regulatory frameworks, mechanisms of censorship, programming strategies, the use the television with a pedagogic function and labor policies are some of the elements that will be taken into account when explaining the distinctive features of the works created by these three television professionals.

Specific objectives of the topic:

- Knowledge of key television texts in the development of international television, from the origins of the medium to the present.
- Knowledge of the institutional factors that determine the creation and reception of television texts.

- Ability to integrate critical thinking and creative practice in development of media story-telling.
- Knowledge of television theory and its application to media story-telling.

Detailed content:

- The concept of authorship in media.
- The producer's medium.
- TV author in contemporary television.
- The production company as TV author.
- The American case: Steven Bochco and commercial fiction.
- The Spanish case: Narciso Ibáñez Serrador, creating TV in Spain during the dictatorship.

Introductory notes:

In the presentation for his project "Television Auteurs: 100 Small Screen Creators" television scholar David Lavery summarized the relevant position of television creators today in contrast with the approach to film auteurism:

"Forty years ago the American film critic Andrew Sarris published *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968*, a book that contributed significantly, thanks to its famous classification scheme for both major and minor film directors, to the importation of auteur theory into the US. Under the influence of Sarris' goal of converting "film history into directorial autobiography," serious American moviegoers and critics interested in the movies began to think and talk and understand the movies through the specially-ground lenses provided by the auteur theory. "Over a group of films," Sarris insisted in what amounted to his foundational principle, "a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature." Now television fans and scholars are thinking and talking about television with a new awareness of authorship: "Have you seen Joss Whedon's new series *Dollhouse*?" "Did you know that Stephen Moffat has taken over as showrunner for *Doctor Who*?"

| | Beginning of TV programming. "the single play" prominent form | Development & consolidation of TV genres | First talk of "Quality" TV | Emergence of Quality TV; TV considered producer's medium | First recognition of TV auteurism | Full-blown interest in TV auteurs and creators begins | Future of the medium of TV in doubt |
|--------|---|--|--|--|--|---|--|
| TV | 1950s | 1960s | 1970s | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s | 2010s |
| | Beginnings | 2 nd Decade(s) | 3 rd Decade | 4 th Decade | 5 th Decade | 6 th Decade | 7 th Decade |
| Cinema | 1890s | 1900-1920 | 1920s | 1930s | 1940s | 1950s | 1960s |
| | First film screenings | Theatrical film born; movies sometimes known as "photoplays" | Development & consolidation of film genres | The studio era in its prime; film considered producer's or star's medium | Developing interest in directors as film artists | Truffaut's seminal essay on auteurism published | Golden Age of auteurism; Sarris brings auteur theory to the US |

David Lavery: <http://davidlavery.net/TVA/>

But this vindication of television authorship started almost four decades ago with the first approaches to television producers. Then, television was the producers' medium. Horace Newcomb in the text "The Television Artistry of Norman Lear" (*Prospects*, 1976) defined the figure of the "self-conscious producer":

"By "self-conscious producer" I mean those individuals who create televisión series out of a personal visión that is best defined by reference to their own expressions of personal values and attitudes. They are the artists and shapers of the shows in the truest sense. They carve broad outlines of form that best express particular visions. In most cases they do not determine the final content of single episodes, nor are they responsible for the minute details of performance. If one looks for theoretical analogues the evident is the auteur theory of film direction"

Mark Alvey took a step further with his account of the development of television programming during the 60s and 70s ("The Independents; Rethinking the Television Studio System", 1997):

"In the context of 1960s television, innovative practices and strategies must be viewed primarily as attempts at product differentiation aimed at achieving competitive advantage in the program-selling marketplace. The independent producer had to differentiate to survive, had to distinguish his product from the competition. Granting that independent production is an avowedly commercial enterprise, concerned with producing popular texts for a large audience, the evidence suggests that the independents were testing the limits of convention and expanding the horizons of popular television entertainment, albeit within fairly circumscribed formal limits. At minimum, independent production can be said to have broadened the creative possibilities within the given narrative and ideological constraints of the industry at the time. Indeed, the "programming crisis" of the late 1950s was due in some measure to the entrenched ideologies and practices of the old studio system (e.g., Warner's western/action cycles), while the drive for differentiation was in large part a function of the "New Hollywood"

The contemporary term for this figure is showrunner. In a *The New York Times* profile of American television producer John Wells, there is an interesting introduction to the concept (Andy Meisler: "The Man Who Keeps 'E.R.' 's Heart Beating" February 26, 1995):

"At any one moment, Mr. Wells is supervising the content and execution of at least four one-hour episodes in various stages of development -- from script to filming to editing to post-production. Future story lines of the series are also his responsibility: on the walls of the conference room next to his office are whiteboards covered, in felt-tip markers, with dozens of handwritten dramatic situations and plot twists, approved by him and cleared for use in episodes as yet unwritten. In the term of the trade, Mr. Wells is "E.R." 's show runner.

For the last 10 years at least, the person with that unofficial title has been the true auteur of series television. Day to day, a show runner makes all important decisions about the series' scripts, tone, attitude, look and direction. He or she oversees casting, production design and budget. This person chooses directors and guest stars, defends the show against meddling by the network or production company and, when necessary, changes its course.

Even in this notoriously collaborative medium, show runners are responsible for what viewers see on the screen. Yet the show runner's true position and influence are unknown to nearly everyone on the other side of the picture tube”.

Now, television authorship is a critical element to understand the current prestige of television series”. For example, see this account by the journalist Emily Nussbaum (“Emily Nussbaum on the New Interactive Showrunner”, *Slate*, May 15, 2011):

“There was worship in the air. And it was no coincidence to me that around this time, possibly in Canada, where all good things come from, that people began referring to a person who oversaw a TV show as the “showrunner.” Unlike the anodyne “executive producer,” it was a title with a brassy, circusy feel: It suggested someone who was in charge, not behind the scenes but out in public, like a ringmaster. Online and off, in interviews about their shows, TV auteurs were eagerly pouring themselves back into that decades-old Lynch mold, making a case for the artist as visionary.

These days, you could cast a mini-series off the sheer profusion of forceful personalities creating television, from the Three Davids of HBO (Simon, Milch, Chase) to the visionary geeks (Whedon, J. J. Abrams, Damon Lindelof) to idiosyncratic figures ranging from Shawn Ryan (*The Shield*) to Matthew Weiner (*Mad Men*), Kurt Sutter (*Sons of Anarchy*), Shonda Rhimes (*Grey’s Anatomy*), and Ryan Murphy (*Glee*). More recently, there has been an ascendant breed of sitcom auteur, including *Community*’s Dan Harmon, *30 Rock*’s Tina Fey and Bob Carlock, *Modern Family*’s Steven Levitan and Christopher Lloyd, *Raising*

Hope's Greg Garcia, and *The Middle's* Eileen Heisler, as well as *Louie's* Louis C.K., whom I profile in this issue.

You don't have to love the work of every showrunner to see what they have in common: When you watch their shows, you know who set their stamp on it."

So we can approach the concept of authorship from three different points of view:

- The traditional producer of American television, as Steven Bochco.
- The showrunner in American television.
- The creator of television in European television, as Narciso Ibáñez Serrador.