

Redefining the Anthology: Forms and Affordances in Digital Culture

Giulia Taurino / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract¹

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In recent years, television studies intersected with interdisciplinary topics as a consequence of the implementation of digital technologies in the production and circulation of content. In addition to favoring the emergence of a network of infrastructures, the digital has come to stimulate new debates, theories and methodologies among media scholars. A common conversation in the broader field of media studies regards, for instance, the ways technologies operate as drivers for cultural and social change. This perspective collides with a tendency to observe digital transformations through the lenses of hard or soft determinism,² a theoretical framework that advances a debate on the causes and effects of technologies, and how they interact with previous socio-cultural, institutional ecosystems. Among others, streaming platforms invite us to reconsider concepts like platformization,³ digitalization,⁴ algorhythmics⁵ and other terms that became part of a renewed vocabulary for the humanities.

Reasoning on the complexities and entanglements of digital technologies and the World Wide Web, this dissertation tackles the spreading of Internet-distributed television through the lenses of platform studies. Starting from a genealogy of the anthology model, my research notably explores forms of content organization inherited from pre-digital practices, as they transitioned to digital culture through evolutionary processes and technological disruptions. Digital culture is therefore intended here in its interaction with previous socio-cultural

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² *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism*, ed. by Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994).

³ Anne Helmond, 'The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready', *Social Media + Society*, 1.2 (2015), <<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080>> [accessed 14 April 2020]; David B Nieborg and Thomas Poell, 'The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity', *New Media & Society* 20.11 (2018), pp. 4275-92, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>> [accessed 14 April 2020].

⁴ David Tilson, Kalle Lyytinen and Carsten Sørensen, 'Digital Infrastructures: The Missing IS Research Agenda', *Information Systems Research*, 21.4 (2010).

⁵ Shintaro Miyazaki, 'AlgoRHYTHMS Everywhere: A Heuristic Approach to Everyday Technologies', *Off Beat* (2013), pp. 135-48, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401208871_010> [accessed 14 April 2020].

systems. Even more than other disruptions, digital cultures and economies had indeed a pervasive impact on media, superposing themselves to pre-existing social and industrial habits, while creating new ones. As Lev Manovich argues, ‘the computer media revolution affects all stages of communication, including acquisition, manipulation, storage, and distribution; it also affects all types of media — texts, still images, moving images, sound, and spatial constructions’.⁶

This dissertation accounts for such a digital turn⁷ and updates media studies to reconsider how the Internet impacted human communication and activities at all levels of making and spreading culture.⁸ In television, the term ‘digital’ addresses a rather complex intertwining of technological, economic, social dynamics, with consequences on the production (*making*) and distribution of (*spreading*) information, narratives and cultural forms at large. To further explore evolutions in television, I examine the anthological turn,⁹ a phenomenon that requires a discussion on the concept of ‘anthology’ first and foremost as a cultural *form* presenting a set of *affordances*, but also as a practice, a model, a process. Finding themselves at the crossroads between television histories and the digital, contemporary anthology series serve as links to media traditions (i.e. literature, radio), as much as they act as medium-specific entities in the definition of classificatory systems on online platforms. It is therefore important to consider contextual media, economic and social environments, as well as historical evolutions.

Drawing upon a post-modern and post-structuralist perspective, this research project ultimately accounts for the complex relation between the anthology form and its potential functions or uses, industrial and social spheres, temporal continuities/discontinuities, techno-cultural transitions, while contributing to frame the coexistence of linear and non-linear environments in the contemporary mediascape. My research positions itself in this highly interconnected technological, industrial, and cultural context where television content is increasingly fragmented. In this scenario, the anthology form sets itself as a model for grouping otherwise distinct, unrelated snippets of content into a coherent collection. Due to its cross-historical, cross-media relevance, the anthology is my case study to address the distribution of cultural content from pre- to post-digital culture. I am notably interested in observing the connection, in constant redefinition, between form, function and content in television anthology series, where modularity is accentuated by a formal division into discrete narrative modules, subjected to mechanisms of scalability, which make the anthology a highly resilient form.

⁶ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 19.

⁷ *Between Humanities and the Digital*, ed. by Patrik Svensson and David Theo Goldberg (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015).

⁸ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

⁹ Milad Doueiri, *Digital Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

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Overall, this research project answers the following questions: can the concepts of form and affordance be usefully integrated in digital media studies? If so, what is their intersection with anthologization processes? What are the affordances, functions and uses of the anthology form in the digital age? On the one hand, the aim of this project is to investigate the ways certain narrative structures typical of the anthology form emerge in the context of television seriality, starting from specific conditions in the media industry. On the other hand, my dissertation offers a broader reading of the very interaction between anthological editorial practices and algorithmic-driven recommendation systems. By focusing on the evolution (temporal, historical dimension) and on the digital circulation (spatial, geographic dimension) of the anthology form, this thesis inserts itself into a larger conversation on digital-cultural studies. The final purpose is to give an overview of the relation between anthological *forms*, distribution *platforms* and consumption *models*, by outlining the following: (i) structural and narrative-oriented affordances; (ii) industrial affordances; (iii) pragmatic and ecological affordances. By doing so, I propose a comparative approach to the anthology as an interpretationally primitive concept,¹⁰ one that is at the same time cross-cultural, cross-historical, cross-genre and accounts for both pre- and post-digital practices of cultural content organization.

¹⁰ Susan Carey, *The Origin of Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).