

AMERICAN TV SERIES: HOW THE ECONOMIC NETWORK SHAPES CONTENT

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In the last decades, TV series have gained prominence in the fields of film and media studies: narrative complexity, quality and audience engagement² are just three of the most examined and debated features. Overall, analysis tend to focus on texts, casting lights on contents, forms, styles and leaving productive processes on the background. However, there is still a need for new approaches that take into consideration the complexity of media industries as a whole.

American TV industry is in fact a network of economic transactions and institutional relations, set into the complex scenario of contemporary *media-scape*. Diversified agents and factors such as technology, business models, industrial strategies and institutional regulations do interact and ultimately contribute to the creation of the product.

Speaking in particular of TV series, contents and forms reflect this complexity and appear as multilayered as their productive counterparts. This is why these shows can no longer be examined as singular text, but, instead, as the outcome of reticular relations. The analysis of this structure requires a systemic perspective where economic and industrial processes gain the foreground, understanding narrative forms as the primary result of commercial interplays and needs.

Given these forewords, the aim of my Ph.D. research is to tie texts (TV series) to their contexts (TV industry, market, media scenario) through the identification of connections between aesthetics and industrial strategies.

The production model of conglomerates multiplies distribution and fosters audience fragmentation, capitalizing on economies of scope and scale.³ It thus requires contents that can be partitioned into smaller pieces, in order to fit all of the niches the media conglomerate needs to cover. Narration therefore turns into a carefully designed architecture that directly reflects the networked spaces and practices of the media system, but that also keeps the narrative concept as its central core.⁴ To adopt a system and process-oriented analysis on the subject, means to conceive these narrative concepts as parts of an heterogeneous and ever-evolving scenario, which certainly requires flexible methods that withstand constant revisions and updates. It also requires tools that goes beyond traditional film studies analysis: this is why I am going to borrow from economics, in particular from the branch of strategy analysis, and network theory.

Strategy analysis, combined with the niche theory, provides valuable frames when it comes to understand the markets of TV series. In particular, the method of segmentation allows to divide broad markets into subsets, according to certain variables such as the demographics of consumers or financing methods. The clusters resulting from segmentation, identify substitutive products and

trace the patterns of competition, the main market force that shapes the strategy of a company. In the specific case of TV series, this process of segmentation helps to map a field where markets overlap on many levels. For instance, practices such as off-network syndication, online licensing (see the recent case of Netflix and Amazon) and illegal downloads (which de facto frees viewers from subscriptions, schedules and measurements), blur boundaries among markets and introduce new forms of competition and coexistence that push the networks to broaden their niches and diversify their content.⁵ Maps of cluster and niches, more than markets in the traditional sense, help to examine how networks build and adapt the “architectures” of their shows according to competitive forces.

Once this economic frame is established, I am going to practice it on actual case studies. The selection criteria for TV series are going to be mainly based on similarities that foster competition and, at the same time, on diversification that makes coexistence possible. Specifically, four series offer such a possibility: *Grimm* (NBC), *The Vampire Diaries* (The CW), *Teen Wolf* (MTV) and *True Blood* (HBO). All of these shows draw from the same narrative genres – supernatural, fantasy and horror – but build and modulate their narrative architectures according to different industrial strategies, as their “parts” move across various markets and niches. The aim is therefore to trace their patterns of competition and coexistence, eventually relating them to peculiar narrative and aesthetic tropes. At this point, a direct contact with production company is essential, in order to acquire reliable data and information.

These preliminary considerations suggest that a network analytic approach is also required; so I am also venturing an hypothesis: the versatile discipline of network analysis could allow to graphically represent the afore mentioned interactions and relations, turning them into reticular networks of nodes and ties.⁶ The challenge here is eventually to find the proper spot for TV series.

- 1 Ph.D. dissertation supervised by Guglielmo Pescatore and Edoardo Mollona. For information: paola.bremilla3@unibo.it
- 2 See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, New York/London 2008; Janet McCabe, Kim Akass (eds.), *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, IB Tauris, London 2007; Jason Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television,” in *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 58, 2006.
- 3 On the matter of audience fragmentation and polarization: James G. Webster, “Beneath the Veneer of Fragmentation. Television Audience Polarization in a Multichannel World,” in *Journal of Communication*, no. 55, 2005, pp. 366-382; James G. Webster, Thomas B. Ksiazek, “The Dynamics of Audience Fragmentation: Public Attention in an Age of Digital Media,” in *Journal of Communication*, no. 62, 2012, pp. 39-56.
- 4 See Veronica Innocenti, Guglielmo Pescatore, “Dalla cross-medialità all’ecosistema narrativo. L’architettura complessa del cinema hollywoodiano contemporaneo,” in Federico Zecca (ed.), *Il cinema della convergenza. Industria, racconto, pubblico*, Mimesis, Milano/Udine 2012.
- 5 See John W. Dimmick, *Media Competition and Coexistence. The Theory of the Niche*, LEA Communication Series, Mahwah (NJ)/London 2002.
- 6 In the field of media studies, Thomas B. Ksiazek recently implemented network analysis to trace cross-platform audience behavior. See Thomas B. Ksiazek, “A Network Analytic Approach to Understanding Cross-Platform Audience Behaviour,” in *Journal of Media Economics*, no. 24, 2011, pp. 237-251.