

Television strikes back

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Nothing New on the Cathode Tube

Abstract. The main research questions of this paper are based on the need to clarify some major issues concerning the changes induced in television production practices by the new technologies of content transmission. Narrowing down the topic, the central question is if the nature of *televisuality*, of the way television programs are consumed and produced, has been transformed in our contemporary world. The author puts forward concepts like recycled narratives, reused plots and seriality considered to be useful for describing the new types of narrative structures in television films and television series today. By re-interpreting the historical paradigm of the neo-television versus post-television, the author is questioning the classical hypothesis of Jameson about the logic of postmodern production mode. In order to further explore how the new technologies and new media practices have influenced content production, the author uses the concept of “habit loop”, used in market-driven commodities production, to explain the impact of late capitalism of television content production. Following the assumption that we are in a cultural moment when all stories have been told and there are no more creative resources, this inability of storytelling to reinvent itself leads to the dominance of the mechanisms of re-use, re-contextualization and re-focusing. Exploring the traits of post-television, the conclusion of this paper is that televisual productions have now reached the ultimate consequence of the ethos of replay. The author claims that we are beyond the era of the pastiche and we have ushered an era of promiscuous narratives.

Keywords: television, televisuality, promiscuous narratives, storytelling habit loops, replay, new technologies, television series, serials, sitcoms.

The observational premise of this paper is manifest in our daily lives – contemporary audio-visual media and our consumption experiences are radically transforming under the pressure of the new technologies of content transmission. Specialists in various fields of television studies agree that we are in the middle of a transformative period in television production, consumption, but also interpretation (Miller 177). “Old” consumption practices disappear and new modes of interaction are formed by the very nature of the new media. Viewing scheduled programs

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has been gradually replaced by online streaming; VHS tapes are gone, they were replaced by digital video recording tools; DVDs are no longer used since video data bases and data storage of movies or free content exchange on the Internet have made them obsolete. More importantly, the way in which we are using content is generating profound alterations at all levels of televisual practices. Clearly, there is an unassailable process that leads to profound changes in the very nature of our experiences with television and, more radically, to an unfathomed transformation of the intrinsic mechanisms of *televisuality*.

Television is dead, long live television

The problematization of these structural changes happening within the televisual medium is not necessarily new in television studies today. Many authors have been making considerable efforts to debate such changes, which were taking place gradually in the most popular media of the XXth Century. As noted early on by Pierre Bourdieu in his lectures on television (1998), the very “power of television”, its authority given by audience numbers, which has played a major role in the formation of the specific televisual cultural capital in contemporary society, one that provided almost a monopoly in the creation of social significations, is now transformed. For Bourdieu television is a medium that depends on demand (53), thus producers of content are forced to provide for the implied desires of their audience, they need to take into consideration any alterations of the cultural logic of the public. Thus, in an effort to identify the needs of the “new demographic”, we witness the creation of a new *habitus*, new styles and tastes (Bourdieu 1984), which are custom made for these new consumers.

This is why some authors find these arguments sufficient to attribute these changes taking shape in television culture to generational traits – as is the case with Rob Owen, who describes this shift as determined by the needs of “Generation X” (Owen 1997). Clearly our postmodern, consumer oriented society forces media contents to a natural inclination for adaptation to the transformations of the market. Just like in the case of the commodities created by the mass production of goods, the same principle operates in cultural production. Television programs, like TV series or soap operas, are manifestations of the production mechanisms that have generated them and of the characteristics of the audience consuming them. Just like any other form of capitalist manufacturing, centered around profit by selling goods, television (and by this we must understand any form of video production oriented towards a marketed audience) is influenced by demographic transformations. By consequence the transformation of the consumers’ needs leads to the transformation of the products.

Yet one important question which remains unanswered is whether these technological transformations are inducing major psychological and behavioral effects. Further research, based on quantitative analysis, should provide insights into this process. Some popularizing psychologists, like Mari Swingle, suggested rather hastily

that such a shift is already in place. Like many other critical authors today, Swingle claims that we are witnessing the creation of an “i-Mind” (2016), one reconstructed by the digital media, who are influencing our ways of thinking and acting, even creating a new neurophysiological state, one which could be characterized by obsessive-compulsive behaviors.

It is not the objective of this paper nor the qualification of this author to deal with such neuropsychological effects, which are extremely difficult to prove with material evidence. We should rather focus on the changes which are visible in media content creation itself. We have reached a moment in the evolution of technologies which can best be described by the formula contrived by Lucien Sfez (1988). The French theoretician elaborated the concept *tautisme* (tautism) – a combination of tautology and autism (Sfez 17-18) in order to explain a certain type of representation practices, specific to our contemporary forms of communication, which have lost their references in reality and are now repeating tautologically themselves, in an endless auto-referencing sequence. This notion will be developed in the following, since it is my contention also that television contents today are dominated by practice that we can describe as *promiscuous narratives*.

Another major point of view that needs to be developed has to do with the relationship between production *forms* and content *formats*. Here the most important approaches follow the arguments put forward by Fredric Jameson, who connected the developments in television production with the manifestations of late capitalism, considering that the production practices were the most important factors influencing the televisual content and consumption (Jameson 1991). The most difficult question to deal with is, once again, what is happening with television if its specific forms of production are changing. Is there a naturally ensuing cultural and content transformation, since the online streaming technologies have taken over the “old” transmission modes? More relevantly, although television is no longer dominated by the “classical” forms of consumption, many viewers are no longer simply monitoring pre-set programs, this shift from broadcast networks to digital cable television and then to the new online streaming channels is not generalized. How can we be sure that the creation of newer forms of television contents is linked to such practices? And last but not least, is consumption by filtering, interactivity and other innovative forms of viewing experiences, which are obviously part of the new generation’s habits, producing content transformation?

In an effort to make comprehensible such technological changes, authors like Umberto Eco have elaborated models based on an evolutionary perspective on the medium itself. Such television critics were claiming that we have moved from a from a “paleo-television” experience to forms of expression that can be described as “neo-television” (Eco 1990 245), only to reach a “post-television” stage. While neo-television is for Eco dominated by a tele-reality in which the reduced number of cultural information provides a superficial representation, predominantly based

on games and reality shows, it is not clear that we have reached a post-television moment. The argument is that we are switching from a “medium of penury” to a “medium of abundance”, one in which the tele-spectator is also changing. No matter how compelling is Eco’s argument, the fact remains that such a “last stage” in television evolution, one in which the medium has become self-referential and self devouring, needs to be nuanced. This is why this line of thought, which deserves to be followed through and detailed in other researches, will be analyzed from the perspective of content creation.

On the other hand, before moving forward, we need to acknowledge the danger that arises from following such evolutionary perspective, since we could reach to the conclusions of some fatalistic critics, who claimed that we are witnessing **the end of television**. It would appear that another level of our culture has reached “the end”, as Jean-Louis Missika claims that the transformation of television into a juke box, left uncontrolled and without professional support, produces calamitous effects and it has catastrophic consequences (Missika 2006). Others, more optimistic, like Toby Miller, argue that the new devices have lead to an increase of television content consumption, and that web-based technologies are actually expanding the reach of television, making it more prominent and even more influential than ever (186). There are obvious similarities with the long conflict of ideas in the last decade about the end of history, the end of culture or even the end of humankind.

A more moderate approach is needed, with television scholars that are commonly supporting the idea that there is a shift from *broadcasting* to *narrowcasting*, even to *personal casting* as some would argue (Leverette, Ott and Buckley 2008). Most often there are two major case studies offered as relevant for the transformation of television as mass medium in the era of digital technologies. The first was described as the “HBO effect” (DeFino 2013), and it is based on the analysis of the homonymous pay-TV which has (supposedly) created a new type of production environment, and new types of content that some identified as specific to “post-television networks”. The other suggests that television production has been “Netflixed” (Keating 2012), claiming that the video content provider company created by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph played a major role in the shift from the traditional paradigm to a radically new one, again called the “Netflix Effect” (McDonald and Smith-Rowsey 2016). All these assumptions are following a perspective similar to Eco’s conceptualizations, since they claim the end of the “network era”, which characterized television in the United States from the 50s to the 80s, and suggest that we have entered another era, one that began in the early 2000s, identified as “post-network”.

This allowed authors like Amanda Lotz to expand the post-network concept, suggesting that a revolution is taking place at each level of the five components of television industry. The technology is changing, the creation and financing processes are transformed, followed by modifications in the distribution practices and audience formation, thus a “revolution in television” is taking shape (Lotz 2014). Nonetheless,

the assumption presented by Lotz, by which this “changed” version of television has become a niche oriented technology, is contradicted by the enormous global impact of shows like *Game of Thrones* or *House of Cards*. In 2016, the television measurements provided by Nielsen estimated an incredible high of 7.94 million viewers of the first episode of season 6, a massive growth from the already staggering 2.22 million viewers of the 2011 premiere (according to Kissell 2016). I consider necessary to be put in place another explanation, in order to fully understand the mechanisms of “post-television TV”.

From puritanical audiences to promiscuous narratives

It is incontestable that television used to be a non-fictional realm in which the promotion of puritan values and the depiction of virtuous behaviors were cultivated, under the strict control of regulatory bodies like the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the informal pressures of organizations like Parents Television Council (PTC). Broadcasting was limited by severe rating systems, which created a morally pure environment. Obviously this is no longer the case, and it is not necessarily a “technological revolution”. As Greenberg’s report in 1994 indicated, a regular viewer was exposed to 1,400 sexual scenes in a year, with the “Sex on TV” report coordinated by Dale Kunkel confirming a constant increase of sexual content on television (Kunkel 2005).

Some would attribute this increase in eroticism and sexual commodification to the fact that the new post-network TV dramas were no longer restricted by the rules of the FCC. This is also evident, if comparing the “hypo-sexual” discourses of the “paleo-television” and the most recent productions of HBO or Netflix, the sexual boundaries have been pushed as far as possible. We are in a hyper-sexualized moment and our televisual imaginary is dominated by promiscuity, yet the question is whether this is due to a “revolution” in television, or to more ample societal transformations?

I would argue, together with Linda Williams, who convincingly elaborated on this topic, that this is part of a *proliferation of pornography in our popular culture*, visible on the cinema and television screens, a trend that has transformed sexual contents from being **obscene** to being **on/scene**. Many sexual representations which were once unacceptable or un-displayable have now become mainstreamed and even compulsory (Williams 5). This is a long process which has led to the gradual sexualization of narratives and content in many other cultural forms, one which has started long before the apparition of the online environment. The very argument that the changes are induced strictly by the new technologies does not hold ground. In many academic interpretations *Sex and the City* (1998) is provided as a relevant case study for the post-network revolution. Clearly this is one of the most important television series in the process we are describing, at it has played a major role in the transformation of televisuality. *Sex and the City* (SatC) was the “icebreaker” of HBO, the premium cable company used SatC to push the limits of television, attracting

audiences with previously “illicit” and transgressive narratives, it was heavily using sex, violence and profanity in order to make a difference (McCabe and Akass 74).

Yet, if we look at other examples, there are earlier indications for this transformation. A relevant case study is *Baywatch* (1989), together with its spin-offs like *Baywatch Nights* (1995) - a television show of the “network era”, which made popular sexualized displays of women’s bodies placed in low quality storytelling contexts, having more than 1 billion viewers per week! So the standards of the “neo-television”, in which nudity and soft-core eroticism took prominence against moral narratives or educative storytelling developments meant an implicit behavioral promiscuity, initiated a process that was at least a decade earlier than the post-network television. With “adult content” made available to large audiences at viewing hours that were no longer limited to adult demographic, this particular trend was at the heart of a larger direction in contemporary culture, one that David Evans identified as the formation of a “sexual citizenship” (Evans 1993). It is important to underline the term *promiscuous* is not connoted with a negative meaning, it is a mental and cultural manifestation. Access to sexual information and sexual rights, together with the non-discrimination of what used to be considered “unnatural” has led to the formation of a type imaginary that many other anti-moralist authors, like Jane Arthurs, describe as “sexually progressive” (12). Without minimizing the negative role of the sexualization of the media discourses, we must accept that the changes we are dealing with are not exclusively technological.

The pornification of television

For this discussion it is relevant that in our pornography infused society, depicted by many contemporary authors, the “porning” of television plays a major role. Obviously, one of the major characteristics of the non-network television remains the continuous adultization of contents. Nudity, obscenity, profanity and other forms of erotic discourses have become “television friendly”. As pointed out by Leverette, this is almost compulsory with the HBO programming, where there is a constant inclination for a type of discourse which might be circumscribed as obscene by being on/scene, one in which expressions like “cocksucker” and “motherfucker” (144) are no longer considered to be vulgar, but natural.

This must be placed in an overall process of including sexualized activities in almost all productions of the post-television era, one that is cultivating a culture of sexual excess, mainly oriented towards the re-designing of female sexuality. Although some authors like Lotz (2008) are describing the formation of a new, “female centered”, form of television drama, eroticized narratives remain dependent on what one of the early feminists, Andrea Dworkin, pointed out, the use of the pornographic as an instrument of oppression, of patriarchal control (Dworkin 1978). On the other hand, as Linda Kauffman explains it, the graphically explicit sexualization of women is part of a visual culture in which female fantasies have become acceptable

(Kauffman 1998). And, in this re-centering on women desires and erotic fantasy, as it is well documented by the volume edited by Akass and McCabe (2004), *Sex and the City* (SatC) can be seen as a turning point.

It is relevant for our understanding of this phenomenon of sexualization of television content to discuss how these narrative mechanisms are in fact replications of other formats, which in turn are exported in other TV series and shows. Actually *SatC* is built around the dating show narratives in television, mixed with discourses about sexuality which revolve around the problems faced by single, urban women in their mid 30s. More relevantly, this popular television series was showcasing a series of sexual behaviors that were previously excluded from broadcasting: interracial sex, the use of sex toys, out of marriage relationships, gratuitous and mechanical orgasms. An even more radical, and more important element, is the reshaping of the limits of privacy and intimacy in the televisual representations.

Looking at the basic narrative structure of *SatC* we can identify a recurrent structure extremely popular in other media contents. This, in turn, it was borrowed from a very popular trope – the woman writer of sex advice column (with the variations of a sex therapist or a call girl). This woman narrator is depicting her sexual exploits, intimate relationships, erotic tribulations, following the model popularized by Helen Fielding and the subsequent movies, from the Bridget Jones franchise. Each episode of *SatC* regurgitates and exposes the continuous rumination of the main character about diverse sexual practice from threesomes, lesbian encounters, sex toys or infidelity.

This trope of the sexually promiscuous woman, popularized by movies like *Happy Hooker* (1975) or *Pretty Woman* (1990), has proliferated into a mainstream archetype in Hollywood. One of the most recent examples is *The Girlfriend Experience*, a new TV series based on Steven Soderbergh's homonymous movie, which is centered on the life of a New York call girl. The first season, available on Starz on Demand, describes the experiences of a young escort woman, who is introduced in the exciting life of the sexual exploits of the rich socialites. This series shares many traits with another sexually filled TV series, produced by ITV, *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* (2007), which in turn were inspired by the classical Belle de Jour and her best selling "intimate adventures". These programs are examples for the way in which prostitution is glamorized in popular culture – the *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* begins with the catchphrase that reveals this process: "the first thing you need to know about me is that I am a whore". Today almost all television production companies have such formats, as is for example the series developed by HBO for Cinemax, providing another version for the trivialization of sexual depravity – *The Girl's Guide To Depravity* (2012).

This promiscuous behavior is not limited to women, an even more extreme version of the **pornification** is another HBO produced series, *Hung* (2009-2011). This television sexual drama has male prostitution at the epicenter of various narratives. The debauched sex life of Hank, by day a high school history teacher and by night

provider of various erotic services to wealthy women, is nothing but a masculine version of the “call girl” scenario. Other popular television programs provide illustrations for this pattern of hedonism, its male version is best illustrated by one of the most enduring characters in recent sitcoms – Charlie Harper, the male protagonist in *Two and a half Men* (2003). For more than a decade, this television comedy created by CBS was based on the sexual adventures of an alcohol abusing musician, who was having innumerable casual encounters with various women, representing as desirable an otherwise promiscuous life-style. Other similar examples which support the idea of the mainstreaming of promiscuous social behaviors are provided by *Californication* (2007) and *Shameless* (2011). The first television series, aired on Showtime, is featuring David Duchovny as a drunkard writer who is also mingled in a long series of sexual troubles, mixing with porn stars, orgies. In turn *Shameless*, another Showtime remake of a British drama, depicts the life of a father of six who is a heavy drug user and drinker, a morally depraved man who takes the viewer into a life of frivolous conducts. Each character performs various form of sexual shame – the youngest daughter wants to get rid of her virginity, while the eldest must deal with a pregnancy with three possible fathers. The list of sexual acts is interminable in these series, which can be considered an adequate illustration for the transformation of the medium itself - television is becoming a *shameless machine* of projecting sexual desires and anxieties, integral part in the construction of the contemporary **promiscuous culture**.

In order to understand how promiscuity works beyond the psychological or social acts, we need to see it as an inner mechanism of cultural production, one that allows a mental function to manifest itself. Here we must add Umberto Eco’s intuition, who identified *reiteration* as one of the most important elements of popular culture. Such recurrent *topoi* of contemporary storytelling are part of the schematic reuse and repetition of simple narrative structures, based on a profound “hunger” for redundant narratives (Eco 1984 121), which come from the fact that the audience itself is “lazy”. We can describe this inclination as the *ethos of replay*, which is coupled with a careless and facile repetition of shallow meanings.

This mechanism is even more obvious if we take a look at the overabundance of similar works sprawled in both the American and the British television industries. *Mistresses US* (2013) is a recent TV drama, initially developed in the UK (2008-2010), then exported in the US that is relevant for our argument. The initial *Mistresses* serial, produced first by BBC One in 2008, offered the viewers another group of four women trapped in sexual and emotional imbroglio, while feeding on inherent behavioral promiscuity and sexual laxity. The very narrative structure is based on a promiscuous predisposition. From the plot centered around a group of four girlfriends – here led by Savi (played by Alyssa Milano) –, to the backdrop of the posh neighborhood or the simplistic housewives dramedy format multiplied in many different context.

Another more recent example is the Lifetime TV series *Devious Maids*, in which we have the same narrative reiteration of frivolous existence. Five Hispanic women, driven by social ambitions and sexual passion, thrive in the rich neighborhood of Beverly Hills. If the plot-line and characters seem familiar it is due to the fact that the same structure is in place in numerous other television dramas. For example the premise of the killing is almost identical with that of ABC's *Desperate Housewives* (2004). This recurrent and schematic plot is only slightly modified, as is the case with the lonely wives of military men in *Army Wives* (2007), then multiplied incessantly, as with the "Real Housewives" franchise, created by Bravo in 2005 and now has dozens of installments, from *The Real Housewives of New York City* to *The Real Housewives of Melbourne*. Once again, catering to the specific demographic of stay-home women, the narratives are repeatedly projecting the glamorous life of other stay-at-home women, in a highly dramatized and over-sexualized fashion.

This compulsion to display sexual affection and romantic emotions in a voyeuristic and intimate manner, for nothing but superficial amusement, is an integral part of *televisuality*. Television is a perfectly adapted medium for such displays of affection, framed by what Misha Kavka suggestively called the "performative act of love" (Kavka 2008). The earliest, and the best example for the development of such promiscuous televisual environments remains *Big Brother*, the reality show which started in 1999 in the Netherlands and which soon became a global phenomenon. This is a typical format of the ethos of replay, repeatedly re-enacted in hundreds of versions and countries, cultivating a voyeurism specific to the promiscuous nature of the post-television culture. The ingredients of this show are, once more, repeated in other formats.

Another example which follows this trend is provided by contemporary television productions like *The Bachelor* (2002), followed by *The Bachelorette* (2003) or its spawned copycats like *Bachelor Pad* (2010). These shows also indicate how promiscuous behaviors increasingly took over television content. This is best understood if we compare such contemporary productions with similar formats developed during the 60s. Dating shows are one of the most popular formats in the history of television, one of the earliest productions being *The Dating Game* (1965), an entertainment program in which the typical human interactions were extremely puritanical. In the early days of such dating shows a woman was typically placed in a situation in which she could question three potential partners, usually hidden from her and exposed to the viewers, with the purpose of identifying a possible partner. Without questioning the lack of intimacy of such promiscuous premise, the ingredients for attracting audience were still morally austere.

As indicated by a recent scandal in the British media (Plunkett 2016), when Zara Holland, winner of the Miss Britain contest, was de-crowned and her title was withdrawn after having sex on national TV, the era of prudish dating format has been radically transformed, as did the content creation in popular media. The same rule

of constant swapping (of partners and of narratives) generates conformity with the promiscuous mentality we are discussing here. This mechanism of repetition without depth is a trait of many TV series and movies. Just like the famous program *Love Island*, the typical post-television reality shows depict perfect strangers who are asked to pair into love couples, then these couples are continuously changed during the entire season.

Just like *Big Brother*, the competing program running on Channel 5, or shows like *Temptation Island* or MTV's *Jersey Shore* (2009) or *Geordie Shore* (2011), these television dramas attract millions of viewers with the display of multiple permutations and re-combinations of relationships. These re-assemblages of love and affections are more relevant for their imaginary impact, notwithstanding their narrative functions. They create a worldview in which the endless combinatory and the permanent coupling and re-couplings are not only positive, but also imperative. In a fake universe (a villa on a luxurious beach in Majorca or on the coast of the Atlantic) glamor models and regular people compete for hefty money prizes by displaying artificial relationships. The typical promiscuous television program is using multiple camera recording to penetrate the intimacy of people, creating a context in which having sex on live TV is the norm. Coitus in communal spaces, genitalia references and sexual innuendos, and a general emotional promiscuity are desirable.

This increasing promiscuousness of narratives has reached a point where the integration of non-normative sexual behaviors has become radical, in a movement that Margot Weiss described as the "mainstreaming of kink". In the last decades, sexual habits like bondage, fetishistic dominance or sadomasochism and other manifestations of erotic interactions which were previously considered deviant were gradually normalized by the popular media. Not only that depictions and interactions that used to be considered perverse and deviant have been integrated in the contemporary narratives as acceptable discourses, but they were conventionalized and normalized (Weiss 2014).

Activities that were once considered pathological are now in the epicenter of mainstream culture. One of the most relevant examples is provided by the *Fifty Shades of Grey* global phenomenon, which can be seen an illustration of this process of bringing pornographic and perverse behaviors into the fantasies of the living rooms of the entire planet. Described by some critics as "mommy porn" (Barnett 2012), the novel trilogy written by EL James was soon transposed into many other mass culture representations. It is relevant that the initial novel published in 2011 was followed soon by *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*, has reached total global sales of 125 million copies. The story was transformed into a movie in 2015, that also peaked over 570 million dollars in revenues on the global market, a huge financial success since the production budget was about 40 million.

Clearly bondage and submission turned out to be profitable capitalist venture and as soon as the story became a source of popularity and financial success, piggy backs

and copycats followed. An entire Bondage Erotica series was published, explanatory manuals like *Fifty Shades of Kink*. An Introduction to BDSM were released and even a cookbook presenting various ways in which poultry can become tasty was published with the title *Fifty Shades of Chicken*. Naturally the movie was spoofed by the Wayans brothers with *Fifty Shades of Black* (2016) and even a huge number of monster erotica spread in the popular culture, with titles like "Fifty Shades of Oy Vey", "Fifty Shades of Neigh" or "Fifty Sheds of Grey".

This was easily done since the story, provocatively based on the formerly marginal fascination for S&M and other sexual taboos, is simplistic and ridiculously replicable. Its cinematic version turned out to be even more banal, and even visually uninteresting. More important is the fact that the storyline, with the "sinister" corruption of an innocent young student (Anastasia Steele) by a more experienced male partner (Christian Grey) is only a re-multiplied, serialized narrative extremely common in popular culture. This is explicit in the manner in which the failed movie was immediately serialized by Showtime in another themed TV series called *Submission* (2016). This new erotic-thriller is part of the efforts of the cable networks to exploit promiscuity by the mechanical cloning of narratives. Although it claimed to be a novelty, this "provocative" story is simply retelling the old tale of the sexual awakening of a young (and unsatisfied) woman who begins her sexual transformation after reading the erotic novels written by the fictitious Nolan Keats. After meeting the real author of "Slave", the main woman character of the series is initiated in the universe of BDSM.

The ethos of replay

It is the contention of this author that the environment of *homo cathodicus* has been changing constantly in the last 50 years, and all the technological transformations have created major conversions not only of the narratives, but also of the imaginaries. More so, the most recent technological transformations, which began with the availability of contents made possible by the videocassette player and recorder, has reached today their culmination once the recording devices made available by the new digital technologies, with the digital video recorder (DVR), coupled with the huge storage facilities, allowed the viewer not only to generate an archive of his favorite programs, but also to replay and repeat particular frames, story-lines or plots.

Without going too deep into the intricate aspects of technological determinism, it is clear that the copying facilities of our present day *televisuality* have created forms of expression which are manifest at the level of content production. As pointed out with previous examples, the inner nature of television narratives is based on repeated re-telling of already successful stories. As indicated already by Owen, the storytelling universe of the TV dramas is amusingly repetitious and similar actions can be identified in innumerable similar characters, identical plot lines, and narrative structures (Owen 98). One of the best examples of how such "copycat" strategies

operate is provided by television dramas like *Melrose Place*, which was developed as a clone of *90210*, and soon the format was repeated by many other networks, who created their own versions like *The Heights* or *2000 Malibu Road* (more in Owen 82-83).

One possible explanation for this type of repetitive narrative function is strictly economical, repetition has to do with the nature of capitalism and its production mechanisms. As pointed out by Pauline Kael in her critical observations on the nature of contemporary narratives, cable televisions and commercial televisions are generally driven by the drive to profit, and this is a relentless force that influences content production (Kael in Brantley 57). Just like in any other commercial environment the buyers, as Kael observes properly, are afraid of the “unfamiliar” and even worse, of the “original”. Thus the producers are using prefabricated elements of content, in turn this drive toward money making leads to the constant re-usage of already successful ingredients. A more pessimistic view was supported by Lawrence Grossberg (1987) who identified the traits of repetitive narratives in the cop shows of the 80s where, for example, the *Moonlighting* (1985) schematism – a man and a woman, who are first at odds with each other, develop a sentimental relationship – is repeated in shows like *Monk* (2002), *Castle* (2009) or more recently *The Bridge* (2012). This is illustrative of what Jameson called the stylistics of “random cannibalization” (1991 18) in the postmodern culture of spectacles.

For other authors, like Sonvilla-Weiss, the re-working of already existing contents, formats and forms of expression is an integral part of what can be identified as a “remix culture” (55), a positive aspect of contemporary technology driven societies, in which all the modes of production are based on copying, one that has created a “new species” of humans. Another positive take on this assumption that all stories which have been told can be re-used and replicated creatively is promoted by the supporters of the “creative theft” (Kleon 2012). As Kleon traces the long history of creative “theft”, he comes to the conclusion that we live in a world in which “everything is up for grabs” and the author even suggests that we need to “embrace” the fact that “every new idea is a mashup or a remix of one or more previous ideas” (9). Such blatant encouragement of *remix practices* in today’s artistic environments is matching the practices of re-assembling and re-combining that are operational in many cultural production structures. Once again, using the conceptualization provided by Jameson, these are an integral part of postmodern aesthetics in which the notion of authenticity so important in the past is now replaced by a cultural logic dominated by “combining and recombining”, re-animating “dead” objects into new variations.

In the case of television this process is amplified by the profoundly *derivative* nature of contents, which has been well documented – many television programs are simply “derived” (remakes, adapted versions, or simply recuperated format). A “derivative” work, according to international Copyright Laws, is a revision or a transformation of an earlier work or several other works and thus can be protected repeatedly. This can be done in a multitude of ways, by condensation, recasting, abridging or direct

modification. There are innumerable examples of successful contents which are immediately recuperated in other cultural contexts – one relevant show is *Wallander*, the TV series adapted from the novels of the Swedish writer Henning Mankell, first developed by TV 4 in Sweden, then re-created by BBC Four only to become a major trope in contemporary television, with the serialization of the washed out cop theme in series like *Backstrom* (2015), also inspired by a Swedish book series written by Leif Persson, centered around an offensive Portland police officer, or the Canadian Bon cop/ Bad cop (2006) and more recently the popular *True Detective* (2014) all having their source in the pulp magazine versions of “defective detectives”.

Just as Susan Sontag was decrying the decline of true cinema in her radical essay “The Decay of Cinema”, we can contend that television is following the same trend. Basically Sontag was identifying the sources of the same direction, generated by the commercialization of cinema, which was creating by consequence a “policy of bloated, derivative film-making”, a fundamentally “recombinatory art” which has become “decadent” (1996). Clearly we can expand this line of arguments when it comes to the production of television contents.

Instead of conclusions: nothing is old, nothing is new

In fact this is the by-product of a mind set, one which is an integral part of the contemporary business models as Charles Duhigg, the journalist turned neuropsychologist, presents as a positive manifestation. This process, which can be attributed to the understanding of “the habit loop” of consumers (Duhigg 2012), can be perceived as a positive social (and institutional) tool. For obvious reasons, it is widely practiced in many management contexts, including in creative arts and technologies. To simply put it, it is based on a neural process which generates reward for our brains from routines, which our mind perceives as gratifying, and in turn drives humans to search continuously for recognizable and familiar “cues”. This can be transposed in the “power of televisual habits”, one which is providing satisfaction from a repetitious nature of content consumption, with the narrative “habit loops” as an integral part of contemporary storytelling. This kind of content creation leads to what was described by Craig Nelson as *bad TV* (with *Melrose Place* as the quintessential example), a type of unremarkable way of making extremely attractive programs (Nelson 1995). Re-using a typification of characters and interactions, television formats are replicated endlessly – *Friends* or *Seinfeld* are just an example of how standardized sitcoms have become, reusing endlessly the same trope of friends living in close quarters together, meeting in coffee shops and discussing the topics of the day. It is enough to analyze the inner structure of comedic serials like *Coupling* (2003), *How I Met Your Mother* (2005) or *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005) to understand how the mechanism operates.

On the other hand, this type of recuperated contents is not a new practice in the television business model – another suggestive example is provided by the series centered around families and family issues. Following the success of *Married with*

Children, first aired by FOX in 1987, many TV producers used the same “habit loop” to re-use and re-cycle another traditional narrative, that began with the *Brady Bunch*. Others took elements from *The Cosby Show*, while some used a re-contextualized ironical version the family pattern, with *The Simpsons* molded after the same structure. This serialized reprocessing of the same material remains in place today, with more recent “post-television” productions like *The Middle* (2009) or ABS’s creatively titled *The Family* (2014). All these programs offer their viewers re-digested and re-combined, yet recognizable, perspectives on family life.

It seems that our televisual culture is taking too literally the famous wisdom of the Ecclesiastes, which stated “there is nothing new under the sun”. We are part of a culture of recycling which encourages the abandonment of novelty for the benefits of re-usage, one where old story-lines are re-vamped into apparently new narratives. One explanation is economic – the movie industry and the television business are investing money in “safe” narratives. If a story or a character fared well with the public, then the immediate consequence is that it will be continued or re-casted, re-worked and finally packed as a new product. In a market-driven narrative environment spin-offs and imitations thrive.

Together with the over-sexualization of contents, the repetitive formulas and the mechanisms of reuse and re-combining are constructing a *televisual promiscuity*. Even the very idea of “original programming”, which is promoted by the new television zeitgeist of HBO, is in fact based on a re-mixed *hyper-heterogeneity*. While the impact of HBO productions remains unquestionable at the global level, it is necessary to see beyond the business model of the pay channel. The contention here is that HBO’s originality or the innovative nature of Netflix productions and, as a matter of fact, of many cultural products of “post-network” television is in fact based on a profound inclination for recycling. From the narrative elements, from plot lines to characters, from dramatization and elementary tropes, from actions and behaviors, everything is re-mixed in a closed circuit of creativity.

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