

Exploring Flexible Production in 'Original Content' Television

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This paper proposes how production processes may be aligned with the poetics of complex storytelling in recent US high-end television drama using definitions about televisual form from Robin Nelson¹. Such an approach explores the causal relationships between television showrunners and production staff, and the variability they bring to recent types of television production.

Original programming

One of the most notable features of US high-end drama is its fulfilment of the demand for original material. Originality can be described as one of the basic requirements for viewers to notice content in a cluttered media landscape of multiple, competing networks. If original content suggests something not thought of before but not necessarily *sui generis*, it can be better understood as an *innovating process*. High-end drama continues to re-combine forms to introduce something new. In this way, original content suggests a tendency for variable values but, crucially, these are institutionally managed. A signifying system in high-end drama acts as a marker of value as an industrial strategy, which raises the vital question of what these exceptional programmes might offer the producers that create them.

Innovations in the televisual style of high-end drama mark the production process by which authorship originates within the work itself. Original programming from directors such as Paul Sorrentino (*The Young Pope*), Martin Scorsese (*Boardwalk Empire*), Steven Soderbergh (*The Knick*) conflate the idea of a showrunner into an authorial process with an arc of development that demonstrates how style is the conscious intention to offer solutions to narrative problems. At the same time, the role of the writer or director cannot be a theory about how television authorship originates within the work itself – a semiotic immanence. High-end drama destabilises borders using stylistic variables to create more complex dramatic forms. In drama such as *The Knick*, it can be used more to map television drama and its ability to be flexible in its tonalities and textures as evidence of greater variability in production routines.

In this way, authorship is the intersection between various definitions of television production and its operations. One key to success for a showrunner is not necessarily to be a good director or producer but to understand what the network has ordered. In this way, a successful showrunner must interpret the critical function of the network by setting the creative tone of the future show. This underlines the increased complexity in the relationship between a singular, highly motivated individual demonstrating leadership and reliance on short-lived *media clusters* of actors and crew

¹ Nelson, Robin. 2013. *State of Play: contemporary 'high end' TV drama* (Manchester:

that enact their vision. I have adopted two key variables from this integrated approach to further explore the relationship, as well as discuss workflow as an example of path dependency.

A theory of 'flexible specialisation' as a system of transactions suggests how a successful production team led by a showrunner/ series producer is essentially 'nomadic', seeking advantage from innovative programming. For scholars, a variety of research methods are required to explore flexible specialisation – logistical, pastoral, as well as the deployment of creative vision.

A research schema should conceptualise the production of original content as a series of transactions at various stages of the process of filming: planning, set-up, shooting and editing. These transactions are between above-the-line staff or production activities between crew which relies on collaborative knowledge. Of course, deadlines always exist, and showrunners have limited time to search out and evaluate new solutions to every production problem. But the heuristics of high-end television style should include decision-making as sets of transactions between individuals and groups involved in production.

A transactional approach seeks diversity rather than division within production cultures. It encourages an understanding of *flexible specialisation*: less of a hierarchical dependence on standardised products and an ability to innovate new types of original content for television. An aim of my new book, *Televisuality in the Contemporary US Mini-Series*, is to diffuse the production process to understand original content in high-end television drama.

Guerilla Tactics

The Knick directed by Steven Soderbergh combines themes of social and physical abjection with a formal closeness of attention that demonstrates the fascination of bodies on television in hospital drama. However, this is counter-balanced by a kinetic style which complicates the rhetoric of the fixed or fixing institutional gaze in favour of the long take and mobile camera. Soderbergh had already taken full advantage of this mode of filming as an alternative during the making of *K-Street*, his earlier venture onto television in 2003. Yet there are important differences. In *The Knick* he would forgo the type of hand-held DV cameras he had used in *K-Street*. Instead, he adopted a style that can be achieved using a larger camera without the sudden zooms and restricted views he had used earlier. Nevertheless, at important moments, he would continue to create the impression of capturing events as they unfolded rather than events that have been storyboarded and carefully staged for the camera.

Camera mobility for television has been increasing since the development of devices such as the video assist, as well as a greater fluidity using cybernetic devices like jib arms and motorised cranes. Increasingly, television shots are no longer limited to the eye-level or the perspectival range of a human camera operator but start far above the operator's head and offer extensive lateral, vertical, and diagonal shots. This range has meant that a director like Soderbergh can offer a more autonomous approach to style rather than one anchored to the naturalistic aesthetic of an invisible observer watching a scene. The digital option and the small-scale nature of newer cameras has meant not only can they shoot longer continuous takes but they provide further advantages that are different to using the Steadicam. Soderbergh was able to make use of the Red Epic Dragon camera and, with the help of an ipad and smartphone,

communicate his directions to the crew to avoid having to shoot three or four pieces of coverage for scenes.

Using the Red Epic Dragon camera, most of the drama could be shot in the available light without augmentation. A guerrilla style, which Soderbergh had used since the days of his first film, *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, would mean that the shooting could progress quickly, helping the actors to remain focused and maintaining the emotional intensity required by Soderbergh for the characters. An iPad was patched into Soderbergh's camera via wireless to inform technicians and actors waiting on standby of how scenes should be shot. Aesthetic questions would appear on their screens: 'Where is the best place to begin'; 'Perhaps the first shot should both start and end with a close-up of medical instruments used in the procedure'; 'Maybe the shot should end further away from the actors, and then the next shot should pick up in close-up'.

The net effect is that the discovery of a signature directorial style as a point of cultural and commercial worth is troublesome in *The Knick*. The show fails to produce Televisuality that clearly flaunts itself as an 'art-object'. By shooting with a scaled-down crew, on location and using available light, it was possible to allow actors to move freely without the problem of having to hit marks for position, framing and focus. This economic guerrilla style of film-making was one that Soderbergh had been already used to great effect in the world of low-budget independent film, and which he would deploy again in *The Knick*. At the same time, guerilla tactics and the fast pace of shooting are more relational than oppositional to a level of innovation and creative freedom, suggesting variants on mainstream practice in *The Knick*.

Close Analysis and Television Performance

Our forthcoming book² focuses its review of Televisuality through an interrogation of style; within this remit, the critical analysis of performance in screen drama plays a vital role.

There are key questions that this seeks to answer:

- is the nature of television performance changing in the current 'Third Golden Age'?
- are we seeing a convergence of acting style between cinema and television?
- How has the process of creating screen performances changed in the context of changing authorial structures in drama (the emergence of a new generation of all-powerful showrunners).

In this paper we will look briefly at the HBO drama, *The Leftovers*, which ran to three seasons (2014-17) and usefully illustrates some of the issues. In the States, a large number of critics cited *The Leftovers* as the most significant TV drama of the period. Adapted from Tom Perrotta's novel by the star television showrunner, Damon Lindelof,

² Seeing It on Television: Televisuality in the Contemporary US Mini-Series (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021)

who had previously created *Lost*, the show imagines American society three years after a calamitous world event, the Sudden Departure, in which 2% of the population instantly disappeared. Some people interpret this as The Rapture, as predicted in Christian texts, but there is no grounded explanation and the drama looks at the survivors and how they are responding to their collective trauma.

In terms of performance, the show demands a fascinating range of tones. Most characters survive by suppressing their emotions, while experiencing guilt, confusion, and terror that another Sudden Departure may occur. Mental health problems abound; bizarre reactions are common; religious fervour is rampant as well as deep cynicism and despair. Central to the narrative is a cult called the Guilty Remnant, a group who forsake speaking, dress in white and, in a strange parallel to religious sects who torment their flesh, they chain smoke.

Actors playing members of The Guilty Remnant have no scripted lines. They offer us a strange contemporary version of mime, but without the over-expressive use of gesture. These performances are an extreme version of a familiar type of screen acting based on the repression of any externalisation of emotion, an acting style with strong traditions in cinema. Other actors in the drama deliver performances at a high level of intensity, the psychological damage of their characters pouring out in quite exaggerated acting styles. In terms of the study of screen performance, the narrative is useful to us as it takes actors from one state to the other: Liv Tyler, in her first ever television role, plays a woman engaged to be married who ditches her fiancé and joins the Guilty Remnant. Her performance style arcs from the furious breakup with her partner to the mute, heavily controlled performance as a cult member.

We will screen a short clip that illustrates the clashing modes of performance in this unusual drama. In this scene, Christopher Eccleston plays a preacher whose faith is greatly troubled by the Sudden Departure. In this scene, from an episode filmed almost entirely on a passenger ferry, he interrogates a man claiming to be God, played by David Burton.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLYrxNCU_7k

The advantage of a textual analysis of performance is that it allows us to track the developments of acting style against the historical antecedents in television drama. So a style-based close analysis methodology allows us to identify cultural changes in contemporary international television drama, but we have found that the methodology only answers a certain range of research questions. If we want to understand clearly how the changing processes of creative production in this era influence the creative work of screen performers, then a different methodology is required. Only by interviewing those centrally involved in the production of performance – actors, directors, casting directors, editors, showrunners – can we begin to unravel how the production context surrounding screen actors impacts on their methods and the outcomes of their creative work. The second book in our project on contemporary television drama is already at planning stage, based on this different methodology.

Conclusion

An examination of style in contemporary US high-end television complicates debates about production and the role of creativity within it. The tendency for recent television drama to become more like film does not make it cinematic but offers fresh insight into Televisuality. Greater functional flexibility by bringing new skills together gives each

high-end production a temporary advantage. In this way, it complicates our understanding of authorship. Whether this is a satisfactory approach to understanding television production depends on being able to incorporate it into a broader engagement with the industry, as well as studying individual practitioners working in that industry. A mid-range approach of integrating theory with metrics requires an understanding of how clusters of skills and talents interpret shots, including performance, lighting, sound, and other variables in the poetics of complex storytelling. At stake is an understanding of variability in the workflow rather than over-reaching statements about the tendency of high-end television to become more “cinematic”.