Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television

Alongside the host of procedural crime dramas, domestic sitcoms, and reality competitions that populate the American television schedule, a new form of entertainment television has emerged over the past two decades to both critical and popular acclaim. This model of television storytelling is distinct for its use of narrative complexity as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception. We can see such innovative narrative form in popular hits of recent decades from *Seinfeld* to *Lost*, *West Wing* to *The X-Files*, as well as in critically beloved but ratings-challenged shows like *Arrested Development*, *Veronica Mars*, *Boomtown*, and *Firefly*. HBO has built its reputation and subscriber base upon narratively complex shows, such as *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *The Wire*. Clearly, these shows offer an alternative to conventional television narrative—the purpose of this essay is to chart out the formal attributes of this storytelling mode, explore its unique pleasures and patterns of comprehension, and suggest a range of reasons for its emergence in the 1990s.

In trying to understand the storytelling practices of contemporary American television, we might consider narrative complexity as a distinct narrational mode, as suggested by David Bordwell's analysis of film narrative. For Bordwell, a "narrational mode is a historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction and comprehension," one that crosses genres, specific creators, and artistic movements to forge a coherent category of practices.[1] Bordwell outlines specific cinematic modes such as classical Hollywood, art cinema, and historical materialism, all of which encompass distinct storytelling strategies while still referencing one another and building on the foundations of other modes. Kristin Thompson has ex-

tended Bordwell's approach to television, suggesting that programs like *Twin Peaks* and *The Singing Detective* might be usefully thought of as "art television," importing norms from art cinema onto the small screen.[2] Although certainly cinema influences many aspects of television, especially concerning visual style, I am reluctant to map a model of storytelling tied to self-contained feature films onto the ongoing long-form narrative structure of series television and thus believe we can more productively develop a vocabulary for television narrative in terms of its own medium. Television's narrative complexity is predicated on specific facets of storytelling that seem uniquely suited to the series structure that sets television apart from film and distinguish it from conventional modes of episodic and serial forms.

Narrative complexity is sufficiently widespread and popular that we may consider the 1990s to the present as the era of television complexity. Complexity has not overtaken conventional forms within the majority of television programming today—there are still many more conventional sitcoms and dramas on-air than complex narratives. Yet just as 1970s Hollywood is remembered far more for the innovative work of Altman, Scorsese, and Coppola than for the more commonplace (and often more popular) conventional disaster films, romances, and comedy films that filled theaters, I believe that American television of the past twenty years will be remembered as an era of narrative experimentation and innovation, challenging the norms of what the medium can do. Thus for argument's sake it is useful to explore how today's television has redefined narrative norms in a series of ways that I label "complex." Even though this mode represents neither the majority of television nor its most popular programs (at least by the flawed standard of Nielsen ratings), a sufficiently widespread number of programs work

against conventional narrative practices using an innovative cluster of narrational techniques to justify such analysis.[3]

Obviously, the labels "conventional" and "complex" are not value-free descriptions, just as terms like "primitive" and "classical" signal evaluative standpoints in film studies. While I have argued elsewhere for the importance of questions of value in studying television, a tendency that contemporary critical approaches dismiss, I do not propose these terms as explicitly evaluative.[4] Complexity and value are not mutually guaranteed—personally, I much prefer watching high-quality conventional programs like *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and *Everybody Loves Raymond* to the narratively complex but conceptually muddled and logically maddening *24*. However, narrative complexity offers a range of creative opportunities and palette of audience responses that are unique to the television medium and thus should be studied and appreciated as a key development in the history of American narrative forms.[5] Arguably, the pleasures potentially offered by complex narratives are richer and more multifaceted than conventional programming, but value judgments should be tied to individual programs rather than claiming the superiority of an entire narrational mode or genre. Thus while we should not shy away from evaluative dimensions in narrative transformations, the goal of my analysis is not to argue that contemporary television is somehow better than it was in the 1970s but rather to explore how and why narrative strategies have changed and to consider the broader cultural implications of this shift.

Television scholars have typically been reluctant to focus their analyses on the medium's narrative form, as television studies emerged from the twin paradigms of mass communications and cultural studies, both of which tend to foreground social impacts over aesthetic analysis, although using markedly different methodologies. Analyses of conventional television narration are surprisingly limited, with classic work by Horace Newcomb, Robert Allen, Sarah Kozloff, John Ellis, and Jane Feuer representing the bulk of the field.[6] Some early accounts of innovative narrative strategies by Newcomb, Christopher Anderson, Thomas Schatz, and Marc Dolan suggest the antecedents of contemporary narrative complexity in *Magnum, P.I.*, *St. Elsewhere*, and *Twin Peaks*.[7] More recently, Steven Johnson and Jeffrey Sconce have offered their own accounts of contemporary television's narrative form, offering insights that I build upon throughout; I take these writings as a sign that media critics are turning attention to formal and aesthetic issues that have typically been downplayed in the development of television studies as a field.[8] Drawing upon this range of sources, we can establish a detailed account of the narratological form that contemporary American television offers as a true aesthetic innovation unique to its medium. This new mode, which I term narrative complexity, is not as uniform and convention driven as episodic or serials norms (in fact, its most defining characteristic might be its unconventionality), but it is still useful to group together a growing number of programs that work against the conventions of episodic and serial traditions in a range of intriguing ways. While some point to this emerging form as "novelistic" television, I contend that it is unique to the television medium despite the clear influences from other forms such as novels, films, videogames, and comic books.[9]

In examining narrative complexity as a narrational mode I follow a paradigm of historical poetics that situates formal developments within specific historical contexts of production, circulation, and reception.[10] Following a historical poetic approach, innovations in media form are not viewed as creative breakthroughs of visionary artists but at the nexus of a number of historical forces that work to transform the norms established with any creative practice. Such an analysis examines the formal elements of any medium alongside the historical contexts that helped shape innovations and perpetuate particular norms. So what are the relevant contexts that enabled the emergence of narrative complexity? A number of key transformations in the media industries, technologies, and audience behaviors coincide with the rise of narrative complexity, not functioning as straightforward causes of this formal evolution but certainly enabling the creative strategies to flourish. Although there is much more to examine about these various contextual developments, a brief overview of key changes in 1990s television practices points to both how these transformations impact creative practices and how formal features always expand beyond textual borders.

One key influence on the rise of narrative complexity on contemporary television is the changing perception of the medium's legitimacy and its appeal to creators. Many of the innovative television programs of the past twenty years have come from creators who launched their careers in film, a medium with more traditional cultural cachet: David Lynch (*Twin Peaks*) and Barry Levinson (*Homicide: Life on the Street* and *Oz*) as directors, Aaron Sorkin (*Sports Night* and *West Wing*), Joss Whedon (*Buffy*, *Angel*, and

Firefly), Alan Ball (*Six Feet Under*), and J. J. Abrams (*Alias* and *Lost*) as screenwriters. Part of the appeal is television's reputation as a producer's medium, where writers and creators retain control of their work more than in film's director-centered model. Additionally, as reality television has emerged as a popular and cost-effective alternative to scripted programming, television writers seem to be asserting what they can offer that is unique to fictional television; narrative complexity highlights one limit of reality shows, asserting the carefully controlled dramatic and comedic manipulation of plots and characters that reality producers find more difficult to generate.[11] Many of these writers embrace the broader challenges and possibilities for creativity in long-form series, as extended character depth, ongoing plotting, and episodic variations are simply unavailable options within a two-hour film—note how Whedon's film *Serenity*, which extended the narrative of *Firefly*, compressed an entire season's plot into two hours, minimizing storytelling variety, character exploration, and ongoing suspense. While innovative film narration has emerged as a "boutique" form over the past years in the guise of puzzle films like *Memento* and *Adaptation*, the norms of Hollywood still favor spectacle and formulas suitable for a peak opening weekend; comparatively, many narratively complex programs are among the medium's biggest hits, suggesting that the market for complexity may be more valued on television than in film.

Certainly, shifts in the television industry have helped reinforce strategies of complexity. Traditional industry logic dictated that audiences lacked the weekly consistency to allow for serialized narratives, and the pressures of syndication favored interchangeable episodes of conventional sitcoms and procedural dramas. But as the number of channels has grown and the size of the audience for any single program has shrunk, networks and channels have grown to recognize that a consistent cult following of a small but dedicated audience can suffice to make a show economically viable. The overall audience size of *Buffy* and *Veronica Mars* do not make these shows hits, but measured expectations of newer networks like UPN and WB as well as the youthful demographics and cultlike dedication drawn by such programming encourage networks to allow such experimentations to grow an audience. Many complex programs expressly appeal to a boutique audience of more upscale educated viewers who typically avoid television, save for programs like *The West Wing*, *The Simpsons*, and *The Sopranos*—needless to say, an audience comprised of viewers who watch little other television is particularly valued by advertisers. For cable channels like HBO, complex programs like *The Wire*, *Oz*, and *Deadwood* may not reach *Sopranos*-like status, but the prestige of these programs furthers the channel's brand image of being more sophisticated than traditional television and thus worthy of a monthly premium (and generating future DVD sales). While many complex shows like *Firefly*, *Boomtown*, *Wonderfalls*, and early innovator *My So-Called Life* were never granted time to establish a core audience, all of these short-lived programs have emerged on DVD, as their dedicated fandoms embrace the collectability of television in this new form, a trend that the media industries are eager to capitalize upon by creating programs with maximum "rewatchability."[12]

Technological transformations have accelerated this shift in similar ways. For the first thirty years of the medium television watching was primarily controlled by networks, offering limited choice of programming on a tightly delimited schedule with no other options to access content. While reruns proliferated in syndication, typically, programs were shown out of order, encouraging episodic narratives to accommodate an almost random presentation of a series. Since the mainstreaming of cable and the VCR in the early 1980s, the balance has shifted more toward viewer control—the proliferation of channels has helped routinize repeats, so that viewers can catch up on a program in chronologically aired reruns or view missed premium cable shows multiple times throughout the week. Time-shifting technologies like VCRs and digital video recorders enable viewers to choose when they want to watch a program, but, more important for narrative construction, viewers can rewatch episodes or segments to parse out complex moments. While select series have been sold on videotape for years, the compact packaging and visual quality of DVDs have led to a boom in a new mode of television viewing, with fans binging on a show a season at a time (like the frequently reported attempts to watch a season of *24* to match its diegetic time frame), and encouraging multiple viewings of what used to be a mostly ephemeral form of entertainment.

Technological transformations away from the television screen have also impacted television narrative. The internet's ubiquity has enabled fans to embrace a "collective intelligence" for information, interpretations, and discussions of complex narratives that invite participatory engagement—and in instances such as *Babylon 5* or *Veronica*

Mars, creators join in the discussions and use these forums as feedback mechanisms to test for comprehension and pleasures.[13] Other digital technologies like videogames, blogs, online role-playing sites, and fan websites have offered realms that enable viewers to extend their participation in these rich storyworlds beyond the one-way flow of traditional television viewing, extending the metaverses of complex narrative creations like Buffy's Sunnydale and the Simpsons' Springfield into fully interactive and participatory realms. The consumer and creative practices of fan culture that cultural studies scholars embraced as subcultural phenomena in the 1990s have become more widely distributed and participated in with the distribution means of the internet, making active audience behavior even more of a mainstream practice. While none of these new technologies directly caused the emergence of narrative complexity, the incentives and possibilities they provided to both media industries and viewers encourage the success of many such programs.

While claims that programming trends are a direct reflection of audience tastes and viewing practices are gross oversimplifications, there is no doubt that many of the innovations comprising narrative complexity have stuck because they have been actively embraced by viewers. Using the new technologies of home recording, DVDs, and online participation, viewers have taken an active role in consuming narratively complex television and helping it thrive within the media industries. As suggested below, this programming form demands an active and attentive process of comprehension to decode both the complex stories and modes of storytelling offered by contemporary television. Audiences tend to embrace complex programs in much more passionate and committed terms than most conventional television, using these shows as the basis for robust fan cultures and active feedback to the television industry (especially when their programs are in jeopardy of cancellation). The rise of narrative complexity has also seen the rise in amateur television criticism, as sites like televisionwithoutpity.com have emerged to provide thoughtful and humorous commentaries on weekly episodes.[14] Steven Johnson claims that this form of complexity offered viewers a "cognitive workout" that increases problem-solving and observational skills—whether or not this argument can be empirically substantiated, there is no doubt that this brand of television storytelling encourages audiences to become more actively engaged and offers a broader range of rewards and pleasures than most conventional

programming. While it would be hard to claim that any of these industrial, creative, technological, and participatory developments explicitly caused the emergence of narrative complexity as a narrational mode, together they set the stage for its development and growing popularity.

So what exactly is narrative complexity? At its most basic level, narrative complexity is a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration—not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance. Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres. Additionally, narrative complexity moves serial form outside of the generic assumptions tied to soap operas—many (although certainly not all) complex programs tell stories serially while rejecting or downplaying the melodramatic style and primary focus on relationships over plots of soap operas, which also distances contemporary programs from the cultural connotations of the denigrated soap genre.[15] While certainly soap opera narration can be quite complex and requires a high degree of audience activity to parse out the web of relationships and backstory evoked at every plot turn, narratively complex programming typically foregrounds plot developments far more centrally than soaps, allowing relationship and character drama to emerge from plot development in an emphasis reversed from soap operas.

Historically, this move toward complexity dates to the late 1970s and early 1980s, as prime-time soap operas like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* (as well as parodic predecessors *Soap* and *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*) were popular innovations, and more critically hailed (though initially ratings-challenged) shows like *Hill St. Blues*, *St. Elsewhere*, and *Cheers* imported serial storytelling into the generic forms of cop shows, medical dramas, and sitcoms, respectively.[16] Unlike soap operas, these prime-time serials are not uniformly dedicated to delaying narrative closure, as typically these shows feature some episodic plotlines alongside multi-episode arcs and ongoing relationship dramas. These early programs tend to allocate episodic and serial stories as tied to typical generic norms—relationship stories carry over between episodes, as in soap operas, but the police and medical cases are generally bound within one episode or serialized as a two-parter. Thus unlike soap operas, individual episodes have a distinctive identity as more than just one step in a long narrative journey. Similar divisions between serialized relationships and episodic plots continued

to late 1980s programs like *Moonlighting*, *thirtysomething,* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, all of which incorporated innovative narrative devices that would become more common in the 1990s.

The programs of the 1990s and beyond build on 1980s innovations by expanding the role of story arcs across episodes and seasons. Early attempts at this long-form arc storytelling in the mideighties, notably, *Wiseguy* and *Crime Story*, did not catch on with audiences or foster imitators until the breakthrough of *Twin Peaks* in the early 1990s. This cult hit, whose influence was far more long-lasting than the series itself, triggered a wave of programs embracing its creative narrative strategies while forgoing its stylistic excesses and thematic oddities. Effectively a cross between a mystery, soap opera, and art film, *Twin Peaks* offered television viewers and executives a glimpse into the narrative possibilities that the episodic series would mine in the future. While *Twin Peaks* was ultimately a ratings failure, the positive buzz and accolades it received opened the door to other programs that took creative liberties with storytelling form in the early 1990s, most notably, *Seinfeld* and *The X-Files*, both of which added key facets to the repertoire of narrative complexity with more ratings success.

The X-Files exemplifies what may be the hallmark of narrative complexity: an interplay between the demands of episodic and serial storytelling. Complex dramas like *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *The Sopranos* often oscillate between long-term arc storytelling and stand-alone episodes. As Sconce discusses, any given *X-Files* episode might focus on the long-term "mythology," an ongoing, highly elaborate conspiracy plot that endlessly delays resolution and closure, or offer self-contained "monster-of-the-week" stories that generally exist outside of the arcing scope of the mythology. Although *The X-Files* features an influential array of narrational innovations, the show's eventual creative and critical decline highlights one of the key tensions inherent in narrative complexity: balancing the competing demands and pleasures of episodic and serial norms. According to many *X-Files* viewers and critics, the show suffered from too great a disjunction between the overly complex and unsatisfyingly deferred mythology versus the detached independence of monster-of-the-week episodes that might contradict the accrued knowledge of the conspiracy. For instance, the highly regarded (and quite parodic) episode "Jose Chung's *From Outer Space*" mocks the show's nested conspiracies, while the events it presents

seem to undermine some of the revelations of the ongoing mythology concerning alien presence on Earth. Despite viewers' cultish devotion to unraveling the mysteries driving Agent Mulder's endless quest, this episode (as well as many others) left viewers unsure as to how to consistently fit events into the storyworld. Viewing tastes thus divided between conspiracy buffs, who saw the sometimes reflexive and tonally divergent monster-of-the-week episodes as distractions from the serious mythological mysteries, and fans who grew to appreciate the coherence of the stand-alone episodes in light of the increasingly inscrutable and contradictory arc—personally, I found myself in the latter camp before abandoning the show entirely.

Buffy and *Angel* are arguably more adept at juggling the dual demands of serial and episodic pleasures. While both shows (together and separately) present a rich and ongoing mythology of a battle between the forces of good and evil, plotlines are centered upon season-long arcs featuring a particular villain, or "big bad," in *Buffy*'s parlance. Within a given season, nearly every episode advances the season's arc while still offering episodic coherence and miniresolutions. Even highly experimental or flashy episodes balance between episodic and serial demands; for instance, *Buffy*'s "Hush" features literal monsters-of-the-week, known as The Gentlemen, who steal the voices of the town of Sunnydale, leading to an impressively constructed episode told in near silence. Yet despite the episode's one-off villains and highly unusual wordless mode of storytelling, "Hush" still advances various narrative arcs, as characters reveal key secrets and deepen relationships to move the season-long plot forward; many other *Buffy* and *Angel* episodes similarly offer unique episodic elements with undercurrents of arc narration. These shows also interweave melodramatic relationship dramas and character development with story arcs—at its most accomplished, *Buffy* uses forward plot momentum to generate emotional responses to characters and allows relationships to help drive plots forward, as exemplified by how "Hush" simultaneously offers closure to a monster-of-the-week, furthers the relationship between Buffy and Riley, and adds new wrinkles to the season-long arc concerning the Initiative.

But narrative complexity cannot simply be defined as prime-time episodic seriality; within the broader mode of complexity, many programs actively work against serial norms but also embrace narrative strategies to rebel against episodic conventionality. For instance, *Seinfeld* has a mixed relationship with serial plotting—some seasons feature an

ongoing situation, like Jerry's NBC sitcom pilot, George's impending wedding, or Elaine's new job. These story arcs work primarily to offer backstory for in-jokes and self-aware references—George suggests a potential story for an episode of his and Jerry's sitcom "about nothing" based on the night they waited for a table at a Chinese restaurant, the actual plot of an earlier episode. However, these arcs and ongoing plots demand little explicit knowledge from episode to episode, as actual actions and events rarely carry across episodes—arguably because of the infrequency of significant actions and events on a show committed to chronicling minutiae and insignificances. While certainly appreciation of the show's storyworld is heightened the more you notice ongoing references like Art Vandelay or Bob Sacamano, narrative comprehension does not require the engagement in any long-term arcs as with *The X-Files* or *Buffy*. Yet *Seinfeld* offers a wealth of narrative complexity, often through its refusal to conform to episodic norms of closure, resolution, and distinct story lines. Many episodes leave characters in an untenable situation—Kramer arrested for being a pimp, Jerry running into the woods after becoming a "wolf-man," George stuck in an airplane restroom with a serial killer. These unresolved moments do not function as cliff-hangers as in serial dramas but rather as comedic punchlines not to be referenced again.

Seinfeld and other narratively complex comedies like *The Simpsons*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *Arrested Development* use television's episodic form to undercut conventional assumptions of returning to equilibrium and situational continuity while embracing conditional seriality—some story lines do in fact continue, while others are never referred to again. *Arrested Development*, a more explicitly serialized comedy, subverts these conventions even more, as most episodes end with a "next week on *Arrested Development*" teaser, showing scenes continuing that episode's stories. However, regular viewers soon learn that future episodes will not show these scenes, nor will they have actually occurred within the ongoing storyworld (although in the second season the show varies this norm by allowing some of the teaser material to occur diegetically). Likewise, *The Simpsons* generally embraces an excessive and even parodic take on episodic form, rejecting continuity between episodes by returning to an everlasting present equilibrium state of Bart in fourth grade and general dysfunctional family stasis.[17] However, there are exceptions to these norms, such as Apu's marriage and parenting of octuplets, that suggest at least two years

have passed in Springfield's life cycle—yet nobody else has aged. Often making jokes about the need to return to equilibrium state, *The Simpsons* offers ambiguous expectations over which transformations are "reset" after each episode—frequent losses of jobs, destruction of property, and damaging of relationships that will be restored by next week's episode—and that will be carried over serially—like Apu's family, Skinner and Crabapple's relationship, and Maude Flanders's death. Thus these complex comedies selectively engage the norms of serial form, weaving certain events into their backstories while ambiguously discarding other moments into the more commonplace realm of forgotten episodic histories, a distinction that viewers must either overlook as inconsistency or embrace as one of the sophisticated traits of narrative complexity—evidence of fan practices online suggest that the latter is more common once audiences accept the shifting rules as one of the sophisticated pleasures offered by these complex comedies.

Seinfeld typifies another facet of narrative complexity, offering a more self-conscious mode of storytelling than is typical within conventional television narration.[18] The show revels in the mechanics of its plotting, weaving stories for each character together in a given episode through unlikely coincidence, parodic media references, and circular structure. In conventional television narratives that feature A and B plots the two stories may offer thematic parallels or provide counterpoint to one another, but they rarely interact at the level of action. Complexity, especially in comedies, works against these norms by altering the relationship between multiple plotlines, creating interweaving stories that often collide and coincide. *Seinfeld* typically starts out its four plotlines separately, leaving it to the experienced viewer's imagination as to how the stories will collide with unlikely repercussions throughout the diegesis.[19] Such interwoven plotting has been adopted and expanded by *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *Arrested Development*, extending the coincidences and collisions across episodes in a way that transforms serial narrative into elaborate inside jokes—only by knowing Larry's encounter with Michael the blind man from *Curb*'s first season does his return in the fourth season make sense. Likewise, *Arrested* expands the number of coinciding plots per episode, with often six or more story lines bouncing off one another, resulting in unlikely coincidences, twists, and ironic repercussions, some of which may not become evident until subsequent episodes or seasons.

While this mode of comedic narrative is often quite amusing on its own terms, it does suggest a particular set

of pleasures for viewers, one that is relatively unavailable in conventional television narrative. The viewers of such complex comedies as *Seinfeld* and *Arrested Development* not only focus on the diegetic world offered by the sitcoms but also revel in the creative mechanics involved in the producers' abilities to pull off such complex plot structures, a mode of viewing Sconce labels as "metareflexive" but that warrants more detailed consideration. This set of pleasures suggests an influential concept offered by Neil Harris in his account of P. T. Barnum: Harris suggests that Barnum's mechanical stunts and hoaxes invited spectators to embrace an "operational aesthetic" in which the pleasure was less about "what will happen?" and more concerning "how did he do that?"[20] In watching *Seinfeld* we expect that each character's petty goals will be thwarted in a farcical unraveling, but we watch to see how the writers will pull off the narrative mechanics required to bring together the four plotlines into a calibrated comedic Rube Goldberg narrative machine. There is a degree of self-consciousness in this mode of plotting not only in the explicit reflexivity offered by these programs (like *Seinfeld*'s show-within-a-show or *Arrested Development*'s winking acknowledgment of television techniques like product placement, stunt casting, and voice-over narration) but also in the awareness that viewers watch complex programs in part to see "how will they do it?" This operational aesthetic is on display within online fan forum dissections of the techniques that complex comedies and dramas use to guide, manipulate, deceive, and misdirect viewers, suggesting the key pleasure of unraveling the operations of narrative mechanics.[21] We watch these shows not just to get swept away in a realistic narrative world (although that certainly can happen) but also to watch the gears at work, marveling at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics.

The operational aesthetic is heightened in spectacular moments within narratively complex programs, specific sequences or episodes that we might consider akin to special effects. Accounts of cinematic special effects highlight how these moments of awe and amazement pull us out of the diegesis, inviting us to marvel at the technique required to achieve visions of interplanetary travel, realistic dinosaurs, or elaborate fights upon treetops. These spectacles are often held in opposition to narration, harking back to the cinema of attractions that predated narrative film and deemphasizing classical narrative form in the contemporary blockbuster cinema.[22] While such special effects do appear on television (although arguably television's dominant

mode of visual spectacle highlights the excessive beauty norms of beer commercials and *Baywatch* more than the pyrotechnics of the large screen), narratively complex programs offer another mode of attractions: the narrative special effect. These moments push the operational aesthetic to the foreground, calling attention to the constructed nature of the narration and asking us to marvel at how the writers pulled it off; often these instances forgo realism in exchange for a formally aware baroque quality in which we watch the process of narration as a machine rather than engaging in its diegesis.

As programs become established in their own complex conventions we also marvel at how far creators can push the boundaries of complexity, offering baroque variations on themes and norms; these narrative special effects can be the climaxes of shows, as when all the divergent *Seinfeld* or *Arrested Development* plots collide or when a plot twist on *Lost* or *24* forces us to reconsider all that we've viewed before in the episode. Or narrative spectacles can be variations on a theme—*Six Feet Under* begins every episode with a "death of the week," but by the second season the creators vary the presentation of these deaths to offer misdirections and elaborations to keep viewers engaged once they understand the show's intrinsic norms. A particularly telling moment of narrative spectacle comes from the *Lost* episode "Orientation": after discovering what is hidden beneath the mysterious hatch, two characters watch a training film that details the origins of the facility as part of a research institute. Once finished with the enigmatic film containing many obscure details that recast events of the show's first season in a new light, Locke gleefully exclaims, "We're going to have to watch that again!" mirroring the reaction of millions of viewers prepared to parse the film for clues to the diegetic and formal mysteries offered by the show. This is not the reflexive self-awareness of Tex Avery cartoons acknowledging their own construction or the technique of some modernist art films asking us to view their constructedness from an emotional distance; operational reflexivity invites us to care about the storyworld while simultaneously appreciating its construction.

Another level of narrative spectacle centers on entire episodes. *Buffy* is probably the most accomplished show for narratively spectacular episodes, with individual episodes predicated on narrative devices like starkly limiting storytelling parameters (the silence of "Hush"), genre mixing (the musical episode "Once More with Feeling"), shifts in perspective (telling an adventure from the vantage

point of habitual bystander Xander in "The Zeppo"), or foregrounding an unusual narrator (Andrew's pseudodocumentary in "Storyteller"). While each of these episodes and others like them in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* ("Frame of Mind," "The Inner Light"), *The X-Files* ("Monday," "Triangle"), *Angel* ("Smile Time," "Spin the Bottle"), *Seinfeld* ("The Betrayal," "The Parking Lot"), *Scrubs* ("His Story," "My Screw Up"), and *The Simpsons* ("Trilogy of Error," "22 Short Films about Springfield") may offer diegetic thrills and laughs, the more distinctive pleasure in these programs is marveling at the narrational bravado on display by violating storytelling conventions in a spectacular fashion. Through the operational aesthetic these complex narratives invite viewers to engage at the level of formal analyst, dissecting the techniques used to convey spectacular displays of storytelling craft; this mode of formally aware viewing is highly encouraged by these programs, as their pleasures are embedded in a level of awareness that transcends the traditional focus on diegetic action typical of most viewers.

Not only can individual episodes manifest the operational aesthetic through narrative spectacle, but whole programs can be predicated upon such storytelling pyrotechnics, either through their ongoing stories or inherent structure. For an example of the former, *Alias* has offered a strong example of narrative complexity, juggling both ongoing and episodic stories of espionage with arcs of relationship dramas mapped onto both family and spy politics. But its boldest moments of narrative spectacle occur when the plot makes unforeseen sharp twists that cause the entire scenario to "reboot," changing the professional and interpersonal dynamics of nearly every character. The first, and arguably most effective, of these reboots occurred midway through the second season in the post–Super Bowl episode "Phase One"; over the course of this episode, the entire espionage scenario was reconfigured, with the main character's status as a double agent shifting to becoming an outright CIA agent, chasing down the same main villain but with different alliances and motives. Additionally, the relationships between characters transformed, with Sydney's innocent-bystander friend Francie being replaced by a nefarious agent and her long-simmering crush on Vaughn finally coming to fruition—all within one hour! While much of the effectiveness of this shift was in breathing life into a premise that may have been on the verge of becoming too repetitive, an important pleasure was to be found in the impressive way in which the producers were

able to reconfigure the scenario in a way that was diegetically consistent (at least with the show's own outrageous norms of espionage technology and mythology), narratively engaging, and emotionally honest to the characters and relationships. Similar series revisions were pulled off in subsequent seasons of *Alias* as well as *Buffy* (through the introduction of Buffy's sister Dawn) and *Angel* (with the heroes taking over their archenemy's law firm). In all of these cases audiences take pleasure not only in the diegetic twists but also in the exceptional storytelling techniques needed to pull off such machinations—we thrill both at the stories being told and at the way in which their telling breaks television conventions.[23]

Narrative spectacle can be built into the core scenarios of programs as well—*24* is often heralded for its real-time narrative structure, which in narratological parlance equates story time and discourse time (excepting commercial breaks). Even more interesting here is that it may be the only television series ever named for its storytelling technique, not in reference to its diegetic world (the number 24 refers to nothing notable in the storyworld) but rather to the number of hours (and episodes) needed to convey the story. Other programs are similarly notable for their storytelling discourse (how the story is told) more than the story itself—*Boomtown* offers fairly typical police stories, but when told through changing multiple limited perspectives among an ensemble of characters, the cases are more nuanced and complex than they first appear. *Jack and Bobby* tells a typical tale of teen brothers, but, through the conceit of frequent flash-forward interviews in the 2040s, a future tale emerges of one of them becoming U.S. president, with future events and relationships resonating with adolescent family drama. *Reunion* highlights a group of high school friends, with each weekly episode charting one year in their lives over a twenty-year span.[24] In all of these shows what is arguably most compelling and distinctive is not the stories that they tell but the narrative strategies used in the telling.

Narratively complex programs also use a number of storytelling devices that, while not unique to this mode, are used with such frequency and regularity as to become more the norm than the exception. Analepses, or alterations in chronology, are not uncommon in conventional television, with flashbacks serving either to recount crucial narrative backstory (as a detective narrates the solution to a crime) or to frame an entire episode's action in the past tense (like the dramatization of Rob and Laura meeting on *The Dick Van*

Dyke Show). Similarly, conventional programs have often used dream or fantasy sequences to explore possibilities of other scenarios (like *Roseanne*'s retelling as a 1950s sitcom) or to probe a character's inner life (the experimental *St. Elsewhere* episode "Sweet Dreams"). Another device, found in episodes of conventional programs like *All in the Family* and *Different Strokes*, is retelling the same story from multiple perspectives, often called the "*Rashomon* effect" after the landmark Kurosawa film. Voice-over narration is atypical in most television, but conventional programs like *Dragnet* and *The Wonder Years* use it to set the emotional tone and provide expository transitions. Yet all of these devices, which vary from the "exceedingly obvious" mode of conventional television storytelling, typically maximize their obviousness by explicitly signaling them as differentiations from a norm, predicated by expository narration ("I remember it well") or contrived scenarios (like hypnosis, courtroom testimonies, or recollections over a photo album) to highlight how the show is using unconventional conventions.

In contemporary narratively complex shows such variations in storytelling strategies are more commonplace and signaled with much more subtlety or delay; these shows are constructed without fear of temporary confusion for viewers. Fantasy sequences abound without clear demarcations or signals, as *Northern Exposure*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos*, and *Buffy* all present visions of events that oscillate between character subjectivity and diegetic reality, playing with the ambiguous boundary to offer character depth, suspense, and comedic effect. Complex narration often breaks the fourth wall, whether it be visually represented direct address (*Malcolm in the Middle*, *The Bernie Mac Show*) or more ambiguous voice-over that blurs the line between diegetic and nondiegetic (*Scrubs*, *Arrested Development*), calling attention to its own breaking of convention. Programs like *Lost*, *Jack and Bobby*, and *Boomtown* offer analepses in every episode with few orienting signals, while *Alias* and *The West Wing* frequently begin episodes with a teaser at the climax of the story, then turn back the clock to explain the confusing situation with which the episode began. In all of these programs the lack of explicit storytelling cues and signposts creates moments of disorientation, asking viewers to engage more actively to comprehend the story and rewarding regular viewers who have mastered each program's internal conventions of complex narration. These strategies may be similar to formal dimensions of art cinema, but they manifest themselves in expressly popular contexts for mass audiences—we may be temporarily confused by moments of *Lost* or *Alias*, but these shows ask us to trust in the payoff that we will eventual arrive at a moment of complex but coherent comprehension, not the ambiguity and questioned causality typical of many art films.[25]

The "Noël" episode of *West Wing* typifies the complex use of such discursive strategies: the episode is framed by Josh Lyman's therapy session to process his posttraumatic stress reactions to being shot, which allows for the conventions of repeated flashbacks via Josh's narration. However, the flashbacks are rampant and not always signaled as falling within a clear order, with sound bridges between the present-tense therapy and past-tense events adding to a sense of disorientation that the show uses to increase tension and anxiety. Additionally, we see frequent dramatizations of Josh cutting his hand on a glass, an accident he claims to have happened but that his therapist correctly suspects is a lie masking a more violent act; these lying flashbacks lack a clear differentiation from other past events until the end of the episode, leaving the audience to decode the contradictions and confusing chronology. The episode climaxes with a five-minute sequence interweaving disjoined sound and image from five different time frames (including one that never actually happened), rhythmically edited to convey a robust emotional arc—a presentational mode more common to European art cinema than American television but ultimately in service of a coherent ongoing narrative. While much of the episode's pleasure is serial, as the more we know Josh the more we can engage with his breakdown, the episode stands alone as a dramatically compelling character portrait (which won actor Bradley Whitford an Emmy), but only if we accept its distinct storytelling conventions, a competency that regular viewers learn over time. Narratively complex programs invite temporary disorientation and confusion, allowing viewers to build up their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement.[26]

This need for gaining competencies in decoding stories and diegetic worlds is particularly salient across a number of media at the moment.[27] Certainly, videogames are predicated on this ability to learn how to understand and interact with a range of storyworlds and interfaces—nearly every game contains its own diegetic training module, as players learn to master the controls and expectations for this particular virtual world. Cinema has also seen the emergence of a popular cycle of "puzzle films" that require the audience to learn the particular rules of a film to comprehend its

narrative; movies like *The Sixth Sense*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Memento*, *The Usual Suspects*, *Adaptation*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and *Run Lola Run* have all embraced a game aesthetic, inviting audiences to play along with the creators to crack the interpretive codes to make sense of their complex narrative strategies.[28] But crucially, the goal of these puzzle films is not to solve the mysteries ahead of time; rather, we want to be competent enough to follow their narrative strategies but still relish in the pleasures of being manipulated successfully. I doubt anyone who predicts the twists of these films could say that they enjoyed them more than the willing (but still active) spectator who gets pulled along for the ride. Puzzle films invite us to observe the gears of the narrative mechanisms, even flaunting them in a show of storytelling spectacle—think of the climax of *Sixth Sense*, as the twist is revealed through flashbacks demonstrating how the film masterfully fooled its viewers. Although few television programs have followed the puzzle film model fully (individual episodes of *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, *Scrubs,* and *Lost* have mimicked these films, which themselves are influenced by the seminal anthology television program *The Twilight Zone*), what seems to be a key goal across videogames, puzzle films, and narratively complex television series is the desire to be both actively engaged in the story and successfully surprised through storytelling manipulations. This is the operational aesthetic at work—we want to enjoy the machine's results while also marveling at how it works.

Thus narratively complex television encourages, and even at times necessitates, a new mode of viewer engagement. While fan cultures have long demonstrated intense engagement in storyworlds, policing backstory consistency, character unity, and internal logic in programs like *Star Trek* and *Dr. Who*, contemporary programs focus this detailed dissection onto complex questions of plot and events in addition to storyworld and characters. We watch *Lost*, *Alias*, *Veronica Mars*, *The X-Files*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Twin Peaks* at least in part to try to crack each program's central enigmas—look at any online fan forum to see evidence of such sleuths at work. But as in any mystery-driven fiction, viewers want to be surprised and thwarted as well as satisfied with the internal logic of the story. In processing such programs viewers find themselves both drawn into a compelling diegesis (as with all effective stories) and focused on the discursive processes of storytelling needed to achieve each show's complexity and mystery. Thus these programs convert many viewers to amateur narratologists,

noting usage and violations of convention, chronicling chronologies, and highlighting both inconsistencies and continuities across episodes and even series. While certainly audiences have always been active, most scholarly accounts of these processes focus on negotiations with television *content*, reconciling with the politics of Madonna videos or *The Cosby Show*. Narratively complex programming invites audiences to engage actively at the level of *form* as well, highlighting the conventionality of traditional television and exploring the possibilities of both innovative long-term storytelling and creative intraepisode discursive strategies.

Many of these programs outright demand such level of engagement—it is hard to imagine how someone might watch *Lost* or *Arrested Development* without noting their formal innovations and considering how the use of flashbacks or reflexive narration changes their perspectives on the narrative action. You cannot simply watch these programs as an unmediated window to a realistic storyworld into which you might escape; rather, narratively complex television demands you pay attention to the window frames, asking you to reflect on how it provides partial access to the diegesis and how the panes of glass distort your vision of the unfolding action. Interestingly, these programs can be quite popular with a mass audience (*Lost*, *Seinfeld*, *The X-Files*) or have narrow appeals to cult viewers willing to invest the effort into the decoding process (*Arrested Development*, *Veronica Mars*, *Firefly*)—while certainly many of these cult shows have demanding narratives that may seem inaccessible to a mass audience, the striking popularity of some complex programs suggests that a mass audience can engage with and enjoy quite challenging and intricate storytelling. This is not to downplay the importance of traditional pleasures of character depth, neat resolution of plots, storyworld consistency, action-oriented excitement, and humor—narrative complexity at its most robust employs all of these elements while adding the operational pleasures of formal engagement. Certainly, chief among *Lost*'s pleasures is the show's ability to create sincere emotional connections to characters who are immersed in an outlandish situation that, as of this writing, is unclassifiable as science fiction, paranormal mystery, or religious allegory, all constructed by an elaborate narrational structure far more complex than anything seen before in American television.

This account of narrative complexity suggests that a new paradigm of television storytelling has emerged over

the past two decades, with a reconceptualization of the boundary between episodic and serial forms, a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics, and demands for intensified viewer engagement focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness. By exploring the formal structure of this mode of storytelling we can appreciate connections with broader concerns of media industries and technologies, creative techniques, and practices of everyday life, all of which resonate deeply with contemporary cultural transformations tied to the emergence of digital media and more interactive forms of communication and entertainment. A common underlying trend that manifests itself both in television narratives and many digital forms like videogames and web pages is a need for procedural literacy, a recognition on the part of consumers that any mode of expression follows particular protocols and that to fully engage with that form we must master its underlying procedures. This manifests itself explicitly in videogames, where procedural mastery is a requirement for success, and web use, as we have come in a very short period of time to accept linking, searching, and bookmarking as naturalized behaviors. For television, contemporary complex narratives are foregrounding the skills of narrative comprehension and media literacy that most viewers have developed but rarely put to use beyond rudimentary means. To understand this phenomenon we must use formal narratology to chart its structure and boundaries while incorporating other methods to explore how this narrative mode intersects with dimensions of creative industries, technological innovations, participatory practices, and viewer comprehension. This mode of analysis, adapted from the paradigm of historical poetics, deserves a place within the multiple methodologies of media studies—exploring the ties between formal developments and cultural contexts highlights that all facets of media, from production to reception, are embedded within the complex means by which television tells complex stories.

Notes

1. Bordwell, *Narration* 155.
2. Thompson, *Storytelling*.
3. This essay considers entertainment, scripted series programming with recurring situations and/or characters exclusively; thus made-for-TV-movies, miniseries, sketch comedy, anthology, variety, news, documentary, and reality programming, while certainly interesting and potentially incorporating facets of these narrative modes, all fall outside my analytic scope.
4. Mittell, "The Loss of Value."

5. Arguably, many of the trademarks of narrative complexity are more commonplace in other national television forms, and certainly the influence of British television upon American programming cannot be understated. Yet there is still value in understanding how American programming, which of course saturates the global media market, has evolved on its own terms.
6. Newcomb, *TV*; Feuer; Allen; Kozloff; Ellis.
7. Newcomb, "*Magnum*"; Anderson; Schatz; Dolan.
8. Sconce; Johnson.
9. See McGrath for an influential characterization of novelistic television.
10. See Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema"; Jenkins, "Historical Poetics." Mittell, *Genre and Television*, applies historical poetics to television via *Dragnet* and the police genre.
11. Not to suggest that reality television lacks complexity, but it seems that typically the arcing dimensions of most reality shows stem more from characters and relationships (as in traditional soap operas) than events and plots.
12. Johnson makes this point about the shift from Least Objectionable Programming to Most Repeatable Programming.
13. See Jenkins, "'Do You Enjoy'" for an early example of such technological practice; Jenkins tellingly quotes one online fan, "Can you imagine *Twin Peaks* coming out before VCRs or without the net? It would have been Hell!" (54).
14. This website recaps both reality programs and scripted dramas (not sitcoms), but among the dramas, the majority could be called narratively complex, and the bulk of programs they elect not to recap are more conventional.
15. See Allen. The gendered pleasures tied to soap operas and narrative complexity are a complicated issue beyond the scope of this essay. Briefly, Warhol outlines traditionally effeminate narrative pleasures, which I believe are incorporated into more masculine genres and narrative structures in complex programming and thus offer more cross-over pleasures for viewers than do conventional soap operas or procedural dramas.
16. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age* offers an account of this era's programming innovations.
17. See Mittell, *Genre and Television* for an account of *The Simpsons*'s parody of sitcom form.
18. For the best account of *Seinfeld*'s narrative techniques see Smith.
19. Johnson discusses multithreaded plotting in depth.
20. See Harris; see also Gunning and Trahair for work exploring the operational aesthetic in film comedy.
21. Such discussions can be found on numerous dramas like *Alias*, *24*, and *Lost* on televisionwithoutpity.com, *The Simpsons* on snpp.com, and *Arrested Development* on the-op.com, although there are certainly dozens of other online discussions about these programs.
22. See Ndalianis.
23. Such narrative reboots have precedents in art cinema, such as the works of Luis Buñuel and David Lynch; however, the effect has a far different impact in an ongoing series with a narrative spanning multiple years versus a single feature film.
24. *Reunion*'s plan was to focus each season upon a different group of friends, jettisoning the situational and character stability typical of series TV altogether and embracing a more flexible season model like that of reality TV, as new contestants and locations come and go, but the underlying mode of presentation remains consistent. The show did

not garner sufficient ratings, leaving the underlying mystery unsolved via a midseason cancellation.

25. Bordwell, *Narration* offers an influential account of art cinema narration along these lines.

26. Interestingly, when I screened this episode for a class, one student who had never watched the show mistook it for a "recap episode," assuming that all the flashbacks referred to events already witnessed in previous shows. The only previously seen footage used is a few seconds of Josh's shooting.

27. See Johnson for more on this cross-media trend.

28. These puzzle films clearly drew many techniques from earlier narrative experiments in the art cinema, but aside from a few "paranoia films" of the 1970s like *The Conversation*, such techniques and form were rarely used.

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