

Resisting 'Flow': Television Nature, Aesthetics and HBO's *Luck*

The nature of television, moreover the 'defining characteristic of broadcasting', is rooted with the idea of fluidity, of sequence and of 'flow'. Content is delivered in accordance with a schedule and the movement of programming from one form into another— whether an episode of a television series', a selection of advertisements, a news segment, or other units of programming— are delivered a stream of content. This stream, although increasingly fragmented, relies on the concept of the sequence, which is ensured by the internal components of programming (i.e. the aesthetics, narrative developments, etc.) as much as it is by the external components. In addition to this philosophy of the nature of *the channel*, programming is too assembled in accordance with 'flow' and must comply with the pressures of audience retention to insure motion. What is identified within programmes are internal segments within programming to meet the demands of commerciality. Particularly, he comments on one such aesthetic— the 'strong opening'— which he argues is 'required to keep viewers watching'. It could be said that television's nature is pressured and rushed; the result of which could be argued as having a repressive effect on content. Artistic expression, creative liberties become limited and developments (narrative and character) appear rushed at times; particular genres appear dominant, such as the crime drama, in favour for their episodic nature and inclusive narrative and character arcs.

Technological advancements in editing and broadcast, as well as evolutions in the form of the [contemporary] television series has seen dramatic developments in the nature and role of programming, as well as broadcasting. The advance of DVD, DVR and stream TV might excite a dialogue and an argument for the relevancy of 'flow' in contemporary television thought. Due to the level of control a viewer has over content— with the ability to pause, fast-forward and rewind, etc— we must question; *is 'flow' still relevant?*

Breakthroughs in form, notably with the emersion of what is identified as "quality

television”, has paved way for the status of the writer-creator in programming— the effect of this has signified the maturity of content, from commercial entertainment, into the plateau of art, of novel, and of critical forum. To contextualise, the role of the aesthetics in the contemporary series might have shifted as a result. In a programme such as *24* (Cochran and Surnow, 2001-11) or *Game of Thrones* (Benioff and Weiss, 2011–) , the aesthetics border cinematic; multi character narratives emphasise the complexity of the script and the ‘young, urban adult’ audience associated with “quality television” are targeted. However, the over-arching narrative compulsion to continue watching is heightened by their aesthetic form— through cliffhanger endings and dramatic, almost exciting cinematics. Arguably, this is ‘flow’.

Programmes, such as those mentioned above, embrace and conform; reinforce and retain the principle flowing quality identified with broadcasting as a form; programmes like David Simon’s *Treme* (2010–) and *Luck* (Milch, 2011) appear to oppose it. If we are to challenge perceptions of *Luck*, one questions that might come up are; *how prepared are the audience to stick with the show?* And furthermore, for what benefit? In the face of addictive television, with the likes of programmes such as *Friday Night Lights* (Grazer and Berg, 2006–2011) and *True Blood* (Ball, 2008–), and the compulsive viewing experience that they promote through stimulating aesthetics and narratives; *Luck* refuses. Referencing Milch’s style, as the case was for *Deadwood* (2004–06), we must highlight the viewer’s need to compromise with the content. Milch insists that the script should be treated like a contract between viewer and creator, in which a degree of audience trust should met. Visually, *Luck* is cinematic— the pilot, directed by Michael Mann, demonstrates the technical calibre and ambition of the show from the start. However, unlike a pilot of many other programmes, *Luck* is ambiguous. It does not see to inform the audience of character hierarchy, nor narrative significant; it does not provide a backstory, nor does it lead us toward episodic conclusion. At the end of the episode— following the muffled dialogue

between Gus Demitriou (Dennis Farina) and Chester Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman)—the slow and tired fade to black confirms that *Luck* is not obligated to conform to the urgencies of ‘flow’ and it is not concerned with heightened drama to ensure audience retention for episode two. Where *Luck* conforms to the idea of ‘flow’ is in fact that it demands an investment on the behalf of the viewer. However, aesthetically it challenges it through long takes, a patient rhythm, obscure dialogue, character interactions and layered form. Through these aesthetic stretches, the material and aesthetic composite of *Luck* could be understood as leaving space for thought. In this space, audience reflection is demanded and participation is essential in piecing together the fragmented (and sparse) layers. This might be an aesthetic objective that is made difficult to achieve under the pressures of ‘flow’, however *Luck* is relentless. It’s aesthetics are non-conformist and activist, in that they oppose the nature of television; this could be read as television content and aesthetics as repelling television form.