

Looking Forward by Looking Back: The Role of Historical Inquiry in Current TV Studies

Early TV: An Analogue to the Digital

Josie Torres Barth, McGill University

Much attention has been paid in recent years to a kind of self-conscious formal experimentation in television. Hallmarks of the “new” style include direct address, the blurring of diegetic levels, *mise en abyme*, metanarration, and destabilization of the text’s ontology. In programs like *Community* (2009-present) and *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013-present?), these characteristics are cited by scholars¹ and critics as proof of certain cult series’ postmodern bona fides, making them objects worthy of serious study. TV scholars tend to see these series as deviations from the norm—the realist telefilm, which dominated the medium from the 1960s through the 1990s. Critics and scholars see these “deviations” as the inheritance of art cinema or the modernist novel, and, more recently, they are seen as present-day manifestations of “the digital turn.” However, these stylistic “innovations” are, in many ways, a return to the formally experimental style of early TV. I argue that parallel moments of metafictional formal experimentation in both early TV and the “late style²” of contemporary TV demonstrates television’s search, in moments of technological transition, for a medium-specific visual and narrative language.

In the early 1950s, as television evolved as a medium distinct from its roots in radio and vaudeville, *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (1950-1958) created a style marked by *mise-en-abyme*, diegetic fluidity, and foregrounded performance. The show’s emphasis on liveness can be read as an attempt to recreate theater in the home. Burns and Allen played themselves as real-life performers who hosted a television show *based on their lives as television stars*. The format permits a remarkable fluidity between diegetic and extradiegetic registers and spaces. George is both host and diegetic character, alternately participating in the action and stepping beyond the proscenium arch to comment on it to the audience. The act of performing is constantly foregrounded, both through plots that hinge on the performance of family unity and sociability between neighbors, and through diegetically motivated song-and-dance numbers. *Burns and Allen* also called attention to the television’s presence within the viewer’s home. The set depicted a suburban neighborhood on a proscenium stage, with homes in cross-section: it was a vision of the postwar home absent the literal and metaphorical fourth wall, demonstrating television’s penetration into the home.

1 See, for example, Ruth Mackay, “Reflexive Modes and Narrative Production: Metatextual Discourse in Contemporary American Narrative,” Elizabeth Fleitz Kuechenmeister, “My Dinner With Abed: Postmodernism, Pastiche, and Metaxy in ‘Critical Film Studies.’”

2 In *On Late Style*, Edward Said observes that an artist’s late works are often marked by formal experimentation, an impulse to break with the conventions of his work because of the knowledge of impending death. There may be a useful parallel for contemporary TV studies in this concept.

In the early 1960s, as television becomes a fixture in the home, *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) called the viewer's attention to the apparatus to demonstrate the uncanny and threatening nature of television's domestic infiltration. The series showed television as a threat to the home and the family, through both direct representations of television and allegories of the TV viewing experience.³ At the moment where television programming shifted from live TV to pre-recorded telefilm, the question of liveness⁴ and its simulation formed the plots of numerous episodes. As the show's opening narration made clear, the "twilight zone" is an interstitial space between disintegrating boundaries of the real and the virtual. The ability of uncanny narrator-figure Rod Serling to cross diegetic boundaries between story world and paratext reveals new conceptions of televisual space, correlated with previously-unseen diegetic levels that are seemingly specific to TV as a medium.

Early metafictional TV called attention to the box in the family home, but how has metafiction changed, as both box and home are no longer integral to watching TV? In addition to the experimental forms outlined above that are characteristic of both early television and the "late style" of contemporary TV, recent formal innovation extends the medium's metafictional possibilities with medium-specific parody. Increased emphasis on "rewatchability" due to viewer control and time-shifting technologies, along with a wealth of TV history to plunder, allow for increased ironic reference to televisual tropes and archetypes. The growth of reality TV, moreover, means an increased emphasis on the blurred boundaries between fiction and reality, lending a faux-documentary style to fictional programs like *The Office* and *Modern Family* and once again—like *Burns and Allen*—causing us to ask what it means for an actor to "play" himself. The legacy of early metafictional TV like *Burns and Allen* and *The Twilight Zone* emerges in the kind of direct address employed in programs like *30 Rock*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, and *The Bernie Mac Show*. It is also evident in the kind of voice-over that blurs the line between diegetic and non-diegetic (*Scrubs*, *Arrested Development*). Today tie-in video games, online role-playing sites, and fan websites mean that TV narrative is no longer restricted to TV, and the seeds of such transmedial storytelling are visible in storyworlds that television once shared with radio, vaudeville, and serial comics. In both its developmental years and its current period of transition, television turns to metafictional self-exploration to explore its essence as a medium.

3 "Where Is Everybody?" (1959), "The Sixteen Millimeter Shrine" (1959), "A Thing About Machines" (1960), "The Hitch-Hiker" (1960), "Static" (1961), "Showdown With Rance McGrew" (1962), "Little Girl Lost" (1962), and "What's in the Box" (1964) are all good examples.

4 "The Lateness of the Hour" (1960), "The After Hours" (1960), "The Hitch-Hiker" again, "Five Characters in Search of an Exit" (1961), "Shadow Play" (1961), "Living Doll" (1963), "Miniature" (1963), "Stopover in a Quiet Town" (1964), and "The Fear" (1964), among others.