

What About TV Acting?

“Performance and Televisual Logics of Endurance”

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I am an avid watcher of sci-fi series *Orphan Black* (BBC America, 2013) and not because I am invested in the program’s mythology. With each episode I find myself paying less attention to the story and more attention to Canadian actress Tatiana Maslany. As series protagonist(s), Maslany plays the roles of over five characters that are all clones. From suburban soccer mom Alison to nerdy graduate student Cosima to trained killer Helena, her myriad transformations (across appearance and behavior) have garnered popular recognition by fans and critics alike. On August 10th, the TV show’s Twitter account tweeted: Suggestion for the #Emmys- creating the Outstanding Actress as an Ensemble Cast category specifically for @tatianamaslany. #OrphanBlack.” The way in which Maslany deftly weaves in and out of different characters in scenes reveals the labor and craft of the performer.

What is the nature of acting for and on television? Approaches to understanding TV acting have often emerged in relation to the theatrical (through the vaudeville tradition) or the cinematic (through stardom and what is known as the “personality” system on the small screen). Additionally, it seems that rarely do performers even categorize themselves as TV actors. But are there specificities to televisual acting? Maslany’s performative multiplicity intrigues me and I want to preliminarily suggest that she showcases the possibilities of TV acting as a form. Her generative acting epitomizes what I consider the televisual logics of endurance that comprise the discourse of performance on the small screen.

Televisual logics of endurance can operate on a variety of levels. In terms of TV acting as a particular kind of work in the media industries, endurance involves the ability to be flexible within a set of constraints (from program to network). With regard to TV acting as performance, endurance is understood through affect. A player’s presence must sustain some degree of spectatorial engagement and resonance independently from characterization or narration. TV acting also requires that the performer immerse oneself physically and psychologically in a diegetic universe – that is, in a particular place or

static space – and often for a prolonged period of time that exceeds movie standards. Another aspect of performative endurance is the act of holding together tensions for

continuity and coherency. Russian filmmaker V.I. Pudovkin writes of film acting: “The aim and object of the technique of the actor is his struggle for unity, for an organic wholeness in the lifelike image he creates.”¹ In different degrees from day players to series regulars, TV actors must balance relatability and familiarity with the capacity for change. There is a stamina involved in the practice of repetition with the potential for difference, thus embodying the security and precarity of TV acting.

In this vein of performative endurance, it may prove useful to extend the notion of complex storytelling (per Jason Mittell) to also include forms of “complex” acting. Here, the question becomes: What does a poetics of television performance look like? Thus, in terms of expanding scholarship on television acting I am interested in what an engagement with performance theory might have to offer TV Studies (a discussion that Mary Beltrán first brought up at the 2014 Flow Conference). Four areas seem ripe for inquiry: 1.) The concept of liveness in relation to television acting. 2.) The ideology of flow as it intersects with bodily gesture and expression, especially as seen in serial melodrama such as soap opera. 3.) The status of legitimation in terms of taste and judgement (“bad” and “good” acting as well as claims to “authenticity” across different genres). 4.) The politics of representation and the study of race, gender, and sexuality on television. Such foci would crucially provide new insight into the dynamically elusive object of study that is TV acting.

¹ V.I. Pudovkin, “Film Acting,” *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television*, edited by Jeremy G. Butler (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 37.