

Television Form: Past, Present, Future

“Historicizing TV Form”

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With the rise of what Jason Mittell famously dubbed “complex TV,” there has been more scholarly attention paid to television form. A range of complex storytelling techniques, such as nonlinear narrative time, metanarration, direct address, and blurring of diegetic levels, are understood by TV scholars as indicative of a “new” wave complex TV. But even a limited knowledge of early TV reveals that these narrative devices have always been part of televisual poetics. Anthology shows like *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* use their hosts to blur diegetic boundaries, highlighting the formal construction of TV storytelling. Episodes of *The Twilight Zone* play with narrative time and point of view in remarkably complex ways, with the trademark final twist forcing viewers to rethink what they’ve just seen. *Dragnet* features fast-paced dialogue that requires attentive viewing to keep up with the story. *I Love Lucy* utilizes intersecting plotlines and wacky coincidences to create *Seinfeld*-level complex comedy. In *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, Burns speaks directly to the audience from within the storyworld in a way that anticipates the kind of intimate direct address that we see in *House of Cards*’ Frank Underwood.

These are just a few brief, underdeveloped claims on the ancestry of complex TV. In my dissertation, I explore a more specific historical development—that of the TV finale. My project contains a series of case studies in contemporary TV storytelling that explore how finales have become a quintessential element of televisual poetics and viewer experience. I argue that increased seriality, audiences’ learned sense of storytelling flow, and paratextual hype raise the importance of finales in the contemporary TV ecosystem. So while the central argument of my dissertation depends on a presentist conception of TV storytelling, I am striving to historicize this claim by seeing how finales have been positioned over time by content creators, critics, and audiences. This question has led me to archives of trade publications and newspapers, where we begin to see TV “finales” discussed as such in the mid-to-late 50s, then with growing frequency in subsequent decades. One review from *The Chicago Defender* of the 1957 finale of *The Nat King Cole Show* points out that “[t]he final show spent several minutes giving credit to the artists who appeared on the show. *This was as it should have been*” (my emphasis). Statements like these demonstrate that audiences have always set particular expectations on finales, considering them as something other than a regular episode. The 1957 review concludes: “From now on six thirty pm will seem strange

until we come to realize other programs can be good,” mimicking the hyperbolic rhetoric of loss that is now common in discussions of finales. My archival mini-mission, which I’m undertaking in the final year of my dissertation work, has shown me that a slight shift in methodology can go a long way; I’ve already perceived historical patterns that shed light on my study of contemporary finales, and I’m seeing that the finale has always been a key factor in TV storytelling, long before the days of “complex TV.”

In co-proposing this roundtable question, my colleague Josie Torres Barth and I seek to call attention to some gaps in Television Studies that we’ve noticed as graduate students entering the field. Josie works mostly on early TV, while I work mostly on new(ish) TV, but we’re both interested in the formal conventions of TV storytelling. As we attended a variety of media studies conferences, we noticed patterns in TV scholarship—we saw that TV historians aren’t typically interested in form, and that formal analysis of contemporary TV series is almost never historically grounded. The more that we talk to each other about our projects, the more we recognize the need for a historicization of TV form. The participants in this roundtable are all doing work that addresses this conceptual and methodological gap, and so I hope that this #Flow16 discussion might encourage others to pay more attention to the overlap between historical and formal analysis.