TV Genre, Political Allegory, and New Distribution Platforms

"Streaming and the Function of Television Genre"
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Although it's been less than four years since Netflix introduced *House of Cards*, such exclusive programming has become a standard expectation on streaming platforms, which now consistently premiere several such series throughout each year. Cable networks such as HBO, AMC, Showtime, and FX continue to roll out this sort of critic- and high-demo-friendly programming, but streamers have legitimately challenged their dominance. Given rapidly shifting metrics and secretive distributors, we'll never know the scope of this challenge in real audience terms. That said, the impact of this programming in media coverage can still be assessed. There, programs' forms and distribution models are still as much a matter of public discussion as character arcs or story events. The concept of a "cable series" came to represent a broadening of established television standards of form and genre in the 2000s; the concept of a "streaming series" is just beginning to represent a similar break from the now-normative expectations of cable.

Streaming's on-demand architecture has been its primary cultural impact (regardless of what viewers actually demand to watch), and this distribution model has affected how television series are now conceived, produced, promoted, and consumed. A brief look at three relatively prominent series, on each of the major streaming services, reveals a bit about how the perception of streaming impacts how series are discussed.

Transparent (2014-) has been perceived as Amazon's flagship series mostly for its subject matter (an older transgender woman and her semi-functional family), and was widely hailed when it premiered for crossing a significant representational boundary.[1] While this response is certainly earned and relevant, it obscures both the series' relative narrative strangeness--it's melancholy, rarely jokey, and often opaque and surreal--for something that seems to "fit" in the "half-hour comedy" box, and the fact that almost all of the rest of Amazon's series are relatively conventional in their genre and form. Amazon gains credit for its "bravery" on representational terms alone, while also quietly relying on the more bread-and-butter appeal of *Bosch*, *The Man in the High Castle*, and its kids' shows (intriguing stylistic quirks on each of these shows notwithstanding). Amazon's browsing interface also obscures the origins of its content, so that its own shows are always adjacent to programs from more established sources.

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[1] Pampanin, Mark. "'This Is Much Bigger Than Me': Jeffrey Tambor's Powerful Golden Globes Speech." Los Angeles Times. January 12, 2015. http://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-ol-jeffrey-tambor-transparent-transgender-golden-globes-20150112-story.html; Aquino, Tara, and Nathan Reese. ""Transparent" Is the Best New TV Show You're Not Watching." Complex. October 03, 2014. http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2014/10/transparent-review-amazon; Grow, Kory. "'Transparent' Creator Jill Soloway on Making the World Safer for Trans People." Rolling Stone. October 20, 2014. http://www.rollingstone.com/tv/features/transparent-jill-soloway-20141020.

In contrast, Hulu's *Difficult People* (2015-) functions in a relatively conventional generic sitcom space. Unlike the brooding meander of *Transparent* (or of, say, Netflix's *Love*), *Difficult People* is fast and drum-tight: its episodes (appropriately) race along at the pace of a snarky Twitter feed, with precision-timed dialogue and performances. This form, and its production process, has become part of the series' critical perception.[2] Aside from its profanity-fueled frankness, it thus functions much more as a proud standard-bearer for a particular *broadcast* television sitcom tradition (carrying on from the likes of *30 Rock*, *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *The Simpsons*, and even *The Dick Van Dyke Show*) then as a stylistic vanguard. Hulu's decision to release its episodes weekly, alongside the weekly drip of new episodes from the broadcast and cable series it streams, amplifies this perception.

Over at Netflix, *Stranger Things*' (2016-) studiously explicit homage to 1980s horror and SF has been the most celebrated feature in its reception.[3] While it certainly has been an unexpected addition to the generic palette of 2010s television, it's also broadly in keeping with Netflix's primary MO thus far: update a relatively familiar genre (confirmed by their subscriber analytics) with obvious production values and a dose of "edge" (see also: *House of Cards*, *Orange Is The New Black*, *Bojack Horseman*, *Sense8*, *Narcos*, *The Get Down*, etc.). That said, Netflix's impact on narrative form has been much more profound: these shows are increasingly designed to be binged. In addition to the default autoplaying of the next episode (which is standard on Hulu and Amazon as well), there are no "previously on" sequences on individual episodes to remind you of what happened before (aside from season-level trailers and recaps). For Netflix, the full-season drop has meant marketing a series release date like a major film's opening weekend, with similar expectations of timely critical and popular attention. However, once that date is passed, Netflix seems content to let that reception, and its proprietary algorithms, bring viewers to its series. Thus, its television seasons are publicly consumed and pondered in a short period of time (whether at release or any time thereafter) like films, novels, or music recordings.

Moving beyond the reception of any particular series, while there still exists a great deal of ambiguity over what constitutes "streaming style" (exacerbated by the blending of original and licensed content on all three of the major streamers), a picture is beginning to emerge that's grounded in relatively familiar generic trappings, yet freer to explore new avenues of representation and narrative form. In most ways, this is not unlike what cable has done since at least *The Sopranos*. But in important ways, it *is* distinctive. Watching *Stranger Things*, or almost any newer streaming series, as a self-paced experience at any time, is different than a slavish obligation to (say) HBO Sunday nights, and *that* difference is increasingly what matters.

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[2] Grant, Drew. "Julie Klausner on 'Difficult People' and Women in Particular." Observer. August 6, 2015. http://observer.com/2015/08/julie-klausner-on-difficult-people-and-women-in-particular/; Phillips, Ian. "The Woman behind Hulu's Funniest Show Credits One Experience as the Most Crucial of Her Career." Tech Insider. September 17, 2015. http://www.techinsider.io/having-a-podcast-helped-julie-klausner-create-difficult-people-2015-8.

[3] Adams, Sam. "'Stranger Things': How Netflix's Retro Hit Resurrects the Eighties." Rolling Stone. July 21, 2016. http://www.rollingstone.com/tv/features/stranger-things-how-netflixs-hit-resurrects-the-1980s-w429804; McNamara, Mary. "Netflix's 'Stranger Things' Is Creepy and Sweet." The Seattle Times. July 20, 2016. http://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/netflixs-stranger-things-is-creepy-emand-em-sweet/