Netflix and the maintenance of television genres out of the flow

Netflix e a manutenção de gêneros televisivos fora do fluxo

CECÍLIA ALMEIDA LIMA*
Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação. Recife-PE, Brazil
Faculdade Boa Viagem, Curso de Comunicação Social. Recife-PE, Brazil

DIEGO GOUVEIA MOREIRA*
Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação. Recife-PE, Brazil
Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Centro Acadêmico do Agreste, Núcleo de Design, Curso de Design e Comunicação Social. Caruaru-PE, Brazil

JANAINA COSTA CALAZANS*
Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação. Recife-PE, Brazil
Universidade Católica de Pernambuco, Curso de Publicidade e Propaganda. Recife-PE, Brazil
Faculdade Boa Viagem. Recife-PE, Brazil

ABSTRACT
The Emmy Awards 2013 nominated Netflix's original series, which have never been in a television schedule. This opened an opportunity for discussions regarding what determines a television product, considering theories that define television products for its continuous flow (within a schedule) and theories that analyze those productions considering textual recurrences that constitute television genres. This paper aims to understand how programs made outside the television flow can be considered to be television products. The objects for that analysis are Netflix's original series developed on 2013.
Keywords: Television, Netflix, television genres

RESUMO
O Emmy de 2013 indicou séries produzidas pela Netflix, que nunca passaram por uma grade de programação televisiva. Esse fato abriu oportunidade para discussões sobre o que determina se um produto é televisual ou não, levando em consideração as teorias que definem produtos televisivos a partir da exibição no fluxo contínuo e as teorias que analisam essas produções diante das recorrências de características que denotam a constituição de gêneros textuais televisivos. O presente artigo tem como objetivo principal entender como programas fora do fluxo televisivo podem ser considerados produtos de televisão. Essa análise será realizada a partir das séries criadas pelo Netflix em 2013
Palavras-chave: Televisão, Netflix, gêneros televisivos

* Currently pursuing a doctoral degree in the Graduate Program in Communications of Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE). Professor of Social Communication at Faculdade Boa Viagem (FBV) and researcher of the Obitel network (Observatório Íbero-Americano da Ficção Televisiva). E-mail: cecilia.almeidarl@gmail.com

**Holds a PhD in Communications from UFPE. Professor of the Social Communication and Design programs at UFPE and researcher of the Obitel network. E-mail: dgmgouveia@gmail.com

*** Holds a PhD in Communications from UFPE. Current Advertising program coordinator at Universidade Católica de Pernambuco (UNICAP) and professor of undergraduate and graduate studies at FBV. E-mail: janaina.calazans@gmail.com

TV: DEFINITION STILL IN PROGRESS

IN 2013, FOR the first time in 65 years, the Emmy Awards, considered to be the TV equivalent of the Academy Awards, nominated series that are exclusively web-streamed. Netflix, producer and online broadcaster of its own audiovisual content, was nominated 14 times, nine of which for the political drama House of Cards, three for the comedy Arrested Development and two for the horror series Hemlock Grove. After the jury voting, Ted Sarandos, Netflix's chief content officer, stated that this initiative confirms the idea that "television is television, no matter what pipe brings it to the screen" (Carr, 2013, electronic source).

Years ago, this statement would have been unconceivable. However, amidst the multiple screen possibilities in which the media field is now immersed, it is a plausible observation. This leads to the question of the criteria considered to define TV content as such. Therefore, it is possible to question if, to be labeled as television content, it still has to be necessarily broadcasted within a programming grid or schedule. The main goal of this article is to question how series out of the television flow can, in fact, be considered TV content. This analysis will encompass three Netflix originals of 2013 and consider theories on textual genres and TV genres in order to verify the hypothesis that even though these series were never part of a TV programming grid, they are still recognized as TV series due to textual recurrences common to that genre.

Questioning the very definition of TV as a medium, Elizabeth Evans (2011) raises a question: would television be defined through its content or through its programming constitutional components, meaning audio and images in movement? The author also questions if the key to explaining TV would be in its technology, capable of broadcasting analogical or digital signals through the atmosphere or cable, or if the alternative path to do so would be to consider a combination of its text, technology and organization as an industry.

On a quest to answer this matter, Evans evokes a few of the most relevant theories on the subject. Among those, it is of our particular interest the theories of Raymond Williams (2004), who puts TV between content and technology, as explained in his concept of *flow*. The media scholar prefers the term flow in his television analyses as technology and cultural form as opposed to the concept of "distribution". The latter, according to him, can be limited and static. To the author, the concept would be fundamental to understand broadcast programming. It is important to note that Williams published *Television: technology and cultural form* in 1975, long before cable TV and all technolo-

gies that today shape the very experience of watching TV; thus, his theories do not tackle the subject directly.

Williams used the concept of flow to describe the stable nature of broadcast programming, through the device, and the way narratives and commercial breaks blend. According to the author, TV is not just individual audiovisual content units put together one after the other. TV would work in a constant and planned flow: a sequence of content transformed by the inclusion of another type of sequence, and so on; and the sum of those makes the real sense of broadcasting.

> In all developed broadcasting systems the characteristic organization, and therefore the characteristic experience, is one of sequence or flow. This phenomenon, of planned flow, is then perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form (Williams, 2004: 86).

The author explains that in all communication systems prior to broadcasting, the essential items were discrete. A book is read as a specific item; a meeting takes place in a particular location and date; a play is presented in a theater and at a scheduled time. The difference of broadcasting is that not only these events become available to home enjoyment through the remote control but also that the real program that is offered is a sequence, or a collection of sequences, of all these types of events. However, spectators would be so naturally into that system that they cannot realize that – even one's vocabulary is shaped by the experience of discrete events. The author's thread of explanation follows with the observation that the human being has developed ways of responding to a particular book or play by the mere recollection of experiences of other books and plays. Our ways of understanding and judging are strongly tied to the forms of attention that are specific, isolated and temporary.

Williams admits that other ways of communication that predate broadcasting also have internal variations. For example, the author mentions the drama performances that may have musical interludes or the newspapers that cover a myriad of themes not related among themselves. Ads, photography and cartoons are also examples. This predisposition towards variability and greater miscellanea of public communications is part of the social experience as a whole. The first phases of broadcasting have inherited these traditions and added some to them. Discrete events – such as the musical concert, lecture, sports match, and musical play – could be broadcasted and, even though

they would be treated as events, they would be shaped as programs, as parts of a program schedule. To Williams, the same term would be insufficient to describe the development of broadcasting: there was a shift from the concept of sequence as programming towards the concept of sequence as a continuous flow.

Broadcasting programming is still a series of temporal units – we can check the time of a particular content and turn the TV on at the scheduled time and respond to it right there and then in an isolated way. However, the way broadcasting is experienced culturally is now different. In TV and radio, since their origins, there have been commercial breaks between units to inform that even though one attraction was over, the next one was about to begin and the service was still active. These breaks, as Williams puts it, were redesigned with time – mainly because they would come to have a commercial goal: advertisement. For British TV those breaks should be as *natural* as possible. In America, sponsored attractions have incorporated such commercial interruptions since the beginning. It was how it was packaged. On the other hand, even though spectators would still interpret it in this way, for Williams the notion of *interruption* has become inadequate: what is offered is not a program of isolated units with particular insertions, but a planned flow, in which the sequence is transformed by including another sequence, in a way that those sequences combined create the flow.

This flow created by the TV way of transmission, according to Williams, has become determinant to evaluate the content transmitted through a product, which was in fact transmitted through the whole collection of programs, and not individually. The same product would have a completely new function when it comes to a different flow. In this sense, it is not really a demand for a product to be created for TV originally. It is known that TV networks assemble audiovisual content of different origins to their notion of flow – for example, movies made for theaters, which on TV get previously planned commercial breaks.

It is this consumer experience of the TV flow that has been facing threats, especially after TV networks began facing other devices as competition, such as VCRs, computers, DVDs and, more recently, internet and the amount of content it offers. The interference of more and more technological devices capable of assisting the user when it comes to consuming TV has been breaking the flow as a fundamental characteristic of this medium – at least in the sense that the TV flow is set by someone other than the spectator (Lotz, 2007).

"Television has been affected, in a direct way, by the new ways production of new technologies, either by the emerging interactive mediums or by the circulation of content through different distribution systems" (Fechine, 2009: 139). Facing this new scene, many theories have been clashing in the past few years about the future of TV alongside electronic media. Cinema and radio both survived TV; printed media is still standing even with the internet as competition. Will TV resist the threat of new media? This fidgetiness has been responsible for mobilizing authors in different countries, with different audiovisual, social and economic experiences, to tackle the question. Many scholars foresee so many big changes that they even think the new and transformed TV should change its name. Spanish author Ávarez Monzoncillo (2011) explains that the new television will allow the audience to watch content whenever, wherever and however they please.

The idea that TV is not dying, just changing, is shared by many researchers. The influence of new media and their impact on TV should not be ignored, but it is best to bet on a relationship in which they reciprocate such influence, not battle it out. American scholar Toby Miller believes in the potential of TV:

> To imagine Internet opposed to television is nonsense; on the contrary, it is merely another way of sending and receiving television. TV is becoming more popular, not less. I suspect that we are witnessing a transformation, rather than the death of television. What started, in most countries, as a way of communication dominated by the State is becoming an international way of communicating through cable, satellite and Internet, dominated by commerce (Miller, 2009: 22).

According to William Urichio, television history has always been about changes. "We have witnessed an ongoing process of transformation in technology, textual organization, regulatory frameworks, and viewing practices" (Urichio, 2009: 60). For Amanda Lotz (2007), the understanding of watching TV has changed since it gained new capacities and spread through multiple screens, so that we continue to define different experiences as *watching TV*. "Television may not be dying, but changes in its content and how and where we view have complicated how we think about it and understand its role in culture" (Lotz, 2007: 30).

Other than the possibility of a rupture on the flow, the content offer is far wider, resulting in a more complex consumer segmentation and audience as well, making ratings more niched and restrict. Cable TV has brought niche

programming, segmentation according to interests, and internet emphasized it. In this sense, even though television still works as a mass medium, in many cases it accommodates niche audiences (Lotz, 2007). Therefore, it is not about the end of broadcasting per se, or the television flow as a whole, but about giving the users the possibility to access content as unique products according to their interests. Thus, the TV industry now experiences the coexistence of *broadcast*, *narrowcast* and *content on demand*, which empowers spectators to watch programs whenever it is most convenient for them, not depending on a programming grid, through the internet (Urichio, 2009).

Since 1997, Netflix has presented itself as a pioneer service in this sense, even though it is not the only one, offering subscribers a catalog of movies and TV shows to be watched in different screens or gadgets as long they are online. At first, it was more of an online movie rental service, but with a fixed price for subscription and unlimited access to the catalog. Currently, the company is also claiming the titles of producer and network for online audiovisual content.

Being judged the same as TV shows that air through TV networks, Netflix originals have never been part of a programming grid. Yet critics and the general population define them as TV content. To explore more of this apparent contradiction it is relevant to investigate theories of speech genres.

A MATTER OF GENRE

TV utterances are presented to spectators in an almost infinite variety. Each concrete utterance is unique and presented in a unique form, even though it was produced within a certain sphere of intentionality, and forged under the influence of economy and encompassing a certain field of events targeting a certain segment of the TV audience and so on. In this way, it is particular and illustrates or mirrors a certain possibility of usage of expression resources of TV, a certain concept of TV, and this is expressed not only in its verbal, figurative, narrative or theme contents, but also in the way of handling the elements of TV codes (Machado, 2001: 70).

We may not be able to say that the very definition of TV is essentially linked to the concept of flow stemming from the sequence of the programming grid anymore. However, it is safe to say that TV, throughout its history, has generated relatively stable language and content forms, recognized as such

by the audience no matter the device used to access them. Therefore, it is fruitful to explore the notion of speech genre.

Russian author Mikhail Bakhtin (1979) says that each sphere of language usage elaborates relatively stable types of utterances, and this is what he calls speech genres. The author claims that the richness and diversity of genres are infinite because the virtual variety of human activity is inexhaustible and each sphere of that activity holds a repertoire of genres that changes and expands when the sphere itself develops and becomes more complex.

> There is such a great diversity when it comes to genres that sometimes it is complicated to study them as categories. In fact, how is it possible to analyze equally such different audiovisual events as a fictional series, the live broadcast of a sport game, the president's speech, a music video, a political debate, a cooking show, an animation with abstract graphics, a mass or an ocean-themed documentary? (Machado, 2001: 70-71).

Bakhtin says the individual can completely ignore the existence of speech genres theory but, in practical terms, uses them with ability and confidence. In the same way, Steger (apud Marcuschi, 1998) says we all know intuitively how to adapt text in communication situations. We all have a socially acquired competence that we use to identify individual texts in relation to general categories. For example, we know how to identify a soap opera and a fiction film or a comedy show. Therefore, genres are "intention spheres" in which utterances can be coded and decoded in a more or less stable way by a community of producers and spectators (Machado, 2001).

For Jost, genre is "currency that regulates the circulation of texts or audiovisual programs in the media realm" (2004: 27). This means that it there is a socially shared knowledge through which not only speakers/writers/directors/producers guide their decisions on the textual genres they must build in each interaction situation, but also listeners/readers/spectators elaborate their grounds for interpretation. In this sense, Marcuschi (1998) says that genres operate as expectation generators for a mutual understanding. All genres bring in themselves a *promise of a world*: "a document, in a wide sense, be it written or audiovisual, is produced based on a type of belief envisioned by the speaker" (Jost, 2004: 33).

On the subject of television genres, Jost has sharp contributions. According to the author, "the first question to the TV spectator is to know if the images one is seeing refer to real life objects or chimeras, fictional entities" (Ibid.), opposing informative genres to fictional ones such as movies,

R

series, soap operas, sitcoms, among others. He considers that, on TV, the "borders we create between imagens that reflect our world and those that represent a world occasionally similar to ours" (Ibid.: 34) become more necessary, although these oppositions are today only virtual and almost nonsense.

> This is the role of genre [...]: to set the level of existence in the world shown to the reader or spectator. The genre is a global promise about this relationship that will then set a global interpretation frame to actors and events represented in words, sounds or images (Ibid.: 35).

Genres are cultural, social and historical products, forms socially matured with communication practices. Therefore, they are nor fruit of individual decisions neither are they easily manipulated. Resulting from collective effort, genres contribute to order and stabilize communication activities of daily life. They are of difficult formal definition and should be contemplated in their uses and social and pragmatic conditions. In addition, as they rise they may fade away. To sum up, as Machado (2011) comments on Bakhtin's work:

> [...] Genre is a stabilizer, a unifying force, a way of organizing ideas, ways and expression resources, a way of making sure communication succeeds and the genre itself lives on in future communities. In a sense, it is the genre that guides all the use of language in a medium, because it is within that genre that the most stable and organized expression trends of a medium evolution are manifested, accumulated through generations of enunciators. However, genre is not necessarily a conservative notion. As they are inserted in the dynamics of a culture, the trends that dominate a genre do not remain the same *ad infinitum*. They are ever changing and at the same time looking for a certain stability (Ibid.: 68-69).

On that note, we should highlight that even with highly predictive and interpretative power for human actions in any discursive context, genres are not instruments meant to cast or hold creative action. They are defined as textual events that are highly flexible, dynamic and plastic. The concept of genre is renewed in each individual work. As new social practices arise or new technologies surface, new genres emerge.

It is not hard to see that, over the last centuries, new technologies, especially new communication technologies, developed new textual genres.

However, it is important to note that the technologies *per se* do not originate genres, but their interference in daily communicational activities do. Surely, these new genres are not absolute innovations; they are mostly anchored in previously stabilized genres. Bakhtin (1979: 277-326) noted that when he talked about genre transmutation and genre blend, the nature of genre making. Technology favors innovation, but innovations are not absolute new. Take the soap opera or telenovela: its anchor is in the serial novel and in the radio soap opera, but the medium is another one, leading to specific characteristics. This shows that in some cases the medium or environment in which the text is shown defines the genre.

Machado (2001) reminds that audiovisual genres in specific are full of inherited TV tradition, but not only. Many are derivatives of literature, film, theater, journalism and so on. The same goes for serialized fiction, the object of this article and one of the genres most adopted by television.

> [...] TV did not create serial narrative. It predates the medium and happened in literature (letters, sermons, etc.), in infinite mythical narratives (such as *Arabian Nights*). Later it had a huge development in serial novels published in newspapers in the last century. The tradition kept going in radio dramas or radio soap operas and met its first few audiovisual examples in film sequences. In fact, it is film that offered the basic model of serializing in audiovisual that TV uses today (Ibid.: 86).

TV has brought serial fiction to screen with its own characteristics, shaping it to a very particular genre, even though it still uses elements of other mediums before it, as literature, radio and film. Machado (2001) describes certain types of serial fiction that are worth mentioning for they relate to the object of this study: Netflix originals. About TV serial fiction, he elaborates a general rule for essential elements saying that:

> *Seriality* is how we name the *discontinuous* and *fragmented* presentation of the TV syntagma. [...] The *plot* is usually structured in *chapters* or *episodes*, each presented on different day or time and yet again split into smaller blocks, more specifically separated by breaks for commercials or advertisements for other shows (Ibid.:83).

The consolidation of cable TV has already brought about certain changes to this basic principle. Channels like HBO and Showtime, for example, dismissed the idea of inserting commercial breaks during their shows – rupturing the flow defined by Williams, who, as mentioned before, studied an era

before cable TV. These channels air each episode without breaks, extending the exhibition time. This may seem like a detail, but it has set in motion a strong wave of changes in the way the tension in the plot is set in the genre of serial narratives.

Machado (2001) believes that without commercial breaks for the audience to *breathe*, there would be a risk of losing interest in the narrative, but the habits of the audience have surely adapted to this new offer and even allowed the genre to innovate. He conceives three basic types of serial narratives – which, again, are not exclusive to TV, although they have become more and more specific on the small screen. The first one, of teleological construction, has a single narrative (or many intertwined or parallel narratives) aired linearly over chapters, just like Brazilian soap operas, called telenovelas. One of the most important characteristics of this genre is the use of cliffhangers at the end of every chapter, building suspense and surprising the audience, leaving them hooked for the next episode. On the second type, each emission is an independent unit, telling a story with a beginning, middle and end. In the next episode, the main characters are the same and so is the style/situation of the narrative. There is no apparent order to how the episodes are presented, in a way it is even possible to change this order and not lose the thread, the logic of the story being told. It is the case of Americans sitcoms such as *Two and a Half Men* or criminal dramas like *Law and Order*. In the third and final one, the one element maintained throughout the many episodes is the theme, but the story, setting, actors and even directors and writers change every episode. It is the case of Brazilian show *As Brasileiras* [roughly translated as *The Brazilian Women*].

On TV, the three types of narratives can be mistaken for one another and recently the line between them has been getting more and more blurred, creating TV of a very hybrid language. American TV shows of independent episodes have already used the idea of teleological construction. For instance, *Twin Peaks* and *Alias* succeeded mainly by using cliffhangers and tension between episodes and seasons. This practice has become even more common these days: even sitcoms and criminal dramas started to opt for longer story arches and smaller independent storylines wrapped in a single bigger narrative. Authors like Jason Mittell consider this model to be "singular in the TV medium, even though other formats like soap operas, films, videogames and comics influence it" (2012: 32). On the other hand, telenovelas in Brazil have taken a lot from American TV series with short story arches and quick resolutions, making narratives pulse in a new and more dynamic way.

As mentioned before, these narrative changes and hybrids happen because language is fluid; "there is always an inevitable process of metamorphosis that makes them evolve in the direction of new and unique possibilities" (Machado, 2001: 70). To go further into the matter, it is important to highlight that in the current scenery of mediums battling each other, the many technology interferences brought about new ways of doing for entertainment industries. Now they try to offer fictional worlds that are rather complex, and storytelling experimentations become more frequent as the sophistication of this activity escalates.

Mittell (2012) says that these new complex forms do not replace conventional narratives that constitute the majority of what is available on TV programming grid these days, but "a considerable number of popular shows operate against the current of conventional narratives, using an array of narrative techniques" (Ibid.: 31). According to the author:

> Along with the exhibition of dramatic reconstitutions of crimes, sitcoms, and reality shows that make the American TV programming grid their habitat, a new form of entertainment has been rising and catching the eyes of the audience and critics. This storytelling model for TV is different because it uses a complex narrative as an alternative to the episodic and serial form that shaped American TV since its birth (Ibid.: 30).

By studying American TV alone, Jason Mittell considers that transformations in the media industry, technology and audience behavior rose at the same time of this complex narrative, although these aforementioned factors are not the fundamental cause of the change. They surface together and make these new creative strategies flourish: "we have noted that these changes have had an impact in creative practices and formal aspects that are always expanding beyond their textual borders" (Ibid.: 34). The author identifies these innovative narrative forms in series like *Lost*, *X-Files*, *Arrested Development* and *Veronica Mars*; also in this category are the products of cable channels like HBO.

Even though the televisual narrative text is amidst this live transforming process, the genres are still relevant for the TV experience. As seen before, the spectator knows, in an intuitive way, what to expect when watching different TV shows and these expectations are met even when the device used to watch them is not necessarily the TV, which is the case of Netflix.

R

NETFLIX: "WE WANT TO BECOME HBO"[1]

"Netflix represents a revolution in the way people watch movies and TV shows" (Netflix, 2013, electronic source). Created in 1997 by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph, Netflix was launched to offer movie rentals online. Two years later the company implemented the monthly fee subscription, making the whole catalog available for a relatively low price. Since then it has been gaining subscribers. In 2002, it had 857 thousand users, 88% more than the year before (Ibid.). By 2007, it launched the streaming service, making it possible to watch movies and TV shows online in real time instead of downloading files. The company made it to the Brazilian market in 2011 as it did in Latin America and the Caribbean. Currently it is present in over 40 countries and the market leader when it comes to on-demand video content. Netflix has over 30 million clients in the United States of America and eight more million around the world (Junqueira, 2013, electronic source).

> For a low monthly fee, Netflix subscribers can watch as many movies and series as they want, when and where they want, in almost any screen available as long as they are online. Subscribers can watch, pause and go back to a content without commercial breaks or commitment (Netflix, 2013, electronic source).

In 2011, Netflix, at the time with a catalog made by other producers and distributed by TV networks or film distributors, announced that it would develop its own original productions. In 2012, it launched the comedy *Lilyhammer*, coproduced with Norwegian network NRK1. The first season was aired first in Norway and was available one month later on Netflix as an 8-episode bundle.

It was in 2013 that Netflix started to invest more in original content, launching series after series exclusively for its platform. The director of the company, Ted Sarandos, said Netflix wants "to become HBO faster than HBO can become us [Netflix]" (Sarandos apud Condliffe, 2013, electronic source). This quote shows that the American cable channel is a reference and Netflix wishes to hold a certain quality standard comparable to HBO regarding TV fiction for targeted audiences.

Until the writing of this article, many audiovisual products have been created and released by Netflix, exploring a number of genres and niches. For this analysis, we are focusing on three originals that have drawn the attention of both audience and critics worldwide: *House of Cards*, a political drama,

Hemlock Grove, a fantastic thriller, and the dramatic comedy *Orange is the New Black*. Most of those involved a renowned cast, famous either because of TV or because of film. Other productions so far include the fourth season of the American comedy *Arrested Development*, previously produced by Fox, the comedy *Derek* and the Brazilian miniseries *A Toca* (roughly translated as *The Lair)* with comedian Felipe Neto; last, but not least, the cartoon *Turbo*, made in partnership with DreamWorks.

With Academy Award winner Kevin Spacey as the protagonist and directed by David Fincher, *House of Cards* is an adaptation of a homonymous novel written by Michael Dobbs and of a British miniseries produced by BBC. The series tells the story of Frank Underwood, an ambitious politician that aspires to an important seat in Washington, D.C. The 13 episodes of its first season were made available on February 1st, 2013. The second season became available for subscribers on February 14th, 2014.

In line with shows such as *American Horror Story*, from FX, *Hemlock Grove* is a thriller. In the series, a young woman is murdered and found near an old steel factory in the fictional city of Hemlock Grove. Two suspects are lined up, a boy who supposedly is a werewolf and the heir of Godfrey properties. Together, they decide to find the real killer by themselves. The story is based on a novel of same title by Brian McGreevy published in 2012. It became available in April 2013.

Inspired by Piper Kerman's autobiography, *Orange is The New Black* tells the story of Piper Chapman after she is sentenced to a year and a half in prison. The series of tragicomic mood was created by Jenji Kohan, who had previous success in cable TV with Showtime's comical series *Weeds*. The first season of *Orange is the New Black* went online in July 2013 and even before people got to see it, the second season had already been ordered.

These original Netflix productions became available exclusively through its own platform. Yet, they were thought within the logistics of *seasons*, typical of American TV series, in which it is standard to have a 12- or 13-episode season on cable and up to 24 episodes per season on regular broadcast TV. The difference is that, instead of making one new episode available every week, as TV (or even YouTube) does, Netflix made the entire season available at once so spectators decide the pace of their watching, meaning they could watch it all in a day if they wish.

In spite of this difference, Netflix series gather elements that are very common to serial TV fiction. The delivery is much like DVD, in which the sense of the programming grid and the flow is broken and the user can decide what do with the content, as foretold by Lotz (2007). This is due

R

to Netflix studies on the habits of subscribers showing that 61% of them tended to watch many episodes at a time (Fallon, 2014), a practice named binge-watching. However, when it comes to language, no bounds were broken: these products feed off their TV genres to allure the audience and make for guaranteed success.

NETFLIX ORIGINAL SERIES AND THE RECURRENCES OF TV TEXTUAL GENRES

HBO has become a reference in quality TV by making a statement that it was not TV on its slogan. "It's not TV. It's HBO." was used from 1996 to 2009, a time when the channel set itself apart from the competition with bold productions that explored controversial subjects such as drugs, homosexuality, crime and also encompassing a great deal of nudity and violence. These productions marked what Mittell (2012) calls the complexity of TV narratives.

Series acclaimed by both audience and critics such as *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *Sex and the City* and *Oz* brought complex storylines, deeply constructed character emotions that defied the dualistic view of the hero protagonist versus a villain. This new quality standard of HBO and other similar channels brought about innovation to genres and changes to fictional series in a domino effect, getting to other networks later on.

> HBO has built a reputation and made for good number of subscribers based on complex narratives such as *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *Curb your Enthusiasm* and *The Wire*. These shows clearly offer an alternative to the typical TV narrative (Ibid.: 30).

HBO productions go for anti-heroes as protagonists, those of flawed nature and nuances that are closer to reality. They also include intricate storylines with deeper development over several episodes, with cliffhangers in strategic moments, combining the structure of episodic serial narrative and teleological storytelling, which Mittell defines as the main aspect of complex narratives. Furthermore, they invest in new and creative ways or telling a story, feeding from different TV genres styles and aesthetics.

> Refusing to finish a story at the end of every episode, which characterizes the conventional episodic format, the complexity of the narrative gives grounds for continuous stories that may even walk through different genres. […] In complex narrative programming, the development of the plot has a more central position,

making it possible for character drama to be created from the plot development and, consequently, making its emphasis opposite to the one of the telenovela (Mittell, 2012: 37).

Just like the development of any other technology, Netflix makes use of the genres that are already part of the repertoire of the audience to create original content, bringing forth products that show the most important elements and aesthetics of TV series (especially cable TV): polemic plots, flawed and sometimes mischievous protagonists. The aim of that is to attract the niche audience, encompassing the scenery of the contemporary consumer.

> Certainly, the changes of TV as an industry reinforced the complexity of strategies. […] As the channel offer increased and audience was partitioned, TV networks have come to realize that, for a show to be commercially viable, the audience may even be small but it has to be a dedicated one (Ibid.: 34).

Netflix originals operate on the same logic, seeking to deliver complex narratives, in Mittell's terms, and the aesthetic of HBO and similar channels, getting in return a "small audience of spectators that have more cultural baggage and that would normally avoid TV" (Ibid.: 34). Taking a closer look at the hour-long dramas *House of Cards*, *Hemlock Grove* and *Orange is the New Black*, they seem at first very similar to cable TV series. As mentioned before, they are all organized into *seasons*, and only *House of Cards* has had its second season released until the moment of this article. The seasons consist of 13 episodes, a number also taken from practices of most cable channels in the USA.

In average, each episode lasts around 50 minutes, possibly reaching a little more than an hour in their most dramatic moments. The first and last episodes of the seasons are a little longer than most for their *special* nature. This is also the standard episode length of cable channel productions since there is also no commercial breaks on that medium to interrupt the flow of the narrative. In the beginning of every episode, there is an opening, a little longer than a minute, to get the spectator on the mood and set the tone. The opening sequence has been less and less used on regular broadcast TV in the USA so that extra time is gained for the show itself. However, they are still used, and in a very artistic way, by cable channels such as HBO, Starz and Showtime, among others, and are usually rich in details, with original opening themes ad aesthetics that match the storylines and mood of the show.

Netflix is no different; it uses opening sequences that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also tone-setting for the series. *House of Cards*

brings a sequence of Washington, D.C., images, its mains monuments and a time-lapse effect that resembles fast-forwarding, all that with a powerful soundtrack. *Orange is the New Black* shows a sequence of static images, as an equivalent of a magnifying glass over women prisoners. *Hemlock Grove* sets the horror mood with bizarre illustrations and digital effects that resemble smoke.

When describing serial fiction, Machado (2001) says that in the beginning of every episode it is common to have a sequence of images to catch up with the latest events in the story, "a way of contextualizing what happened before (refreshing the spectator's memory […])" (Ibid.: 83). As Netflix does not impose breaks between episodes, this resource is not necessary in every episode. Aditionally, the spectator is free to pause, rewind, or watch again a previous episode, making this contextualizing irrelevant and redundant. Yet, between the first and second season of *House of Cards*, Netflix has produced a special episode seeking to show past events of the story so that spectators would not get lost in events and that the show could hit the ground running when season two premiered. This shows that contextualizing is still somewhat relevant to the *on-demand* experience.

Even though every single episode provides a narrative unit that works within itself with a beginning, middle and end, the second type of serial narrative as described by Arlindo Machado (2001), all analyzed series have long story arches, only finding resolution after many episodes, a resource of teleological storytelling. The use of cliffhangers is frequently present "trying to keep the spectator hooked" (Ibid.: 83) and motivating the watching of the next episode. As said before, this hybrid aspect of the narrative is already what makes the TV genres what they are and were seen by Machado (2001) as textual elements that constitute the serial narrative on TV.

The fundamental difference here is that within a programming grid there is necessarily a space between one emission and the next – in the case of TV shows, they usually air once a week. Therefore, the cliffhangers at the end of every episode or chapter keep the spectator "hanging" until the following week. In the case of Netflix, they keep the spectator hooked and stimulate the practice of binge-watching, going through many episodes at once in a shorter amount of time.

Between one season and the next, however, there is a yearlong wait until the new episodes become available. As a closing act, the final moment of the season is usually marked by an overly elaborate cliffhanger, leaving the resolution for the next season. The end of the first season of *Orange is the New Black*, for example, shows Piper Chapman getting into a nasty fight with another in-

mate, but the outcome of the battle is in suspension and will only be shown in the next season.

When it comes to character development and plot, all the analyzed series have protagonists with many emotional layers, personality nuances and contradictions, avoiding the cliché of the hero and damsel in distress of conventional narratives. In *House of Cards* the main character and narrator, Frank Underwood, wishes to become Secretary of State. Tricky, greedy and with no qualm in his actions, Underwood does everything he can to get more power in the American politics scenery, manipulating all characters around him to do his bidding. Almost every other character follows that profile, which brings about plot twists and turns. Piper Chapman from *Orange is the New Black* is selfish, conflicted, impulsive and highly fickle in spite of her best efforts to be a better person. Her behavior and sexual orientation oscillate through the series. The same character development is applied to *Hemlock Grove*, with different character groups.

The diversity of supporting characters is also a trademark of these shows. For *Orange is the New Black* takes place in a woman prison, there is a number of characters and stories to be told, thus each inmate gets a flashback in almost every episode to tell her story; the story of how she was sentenced to jail. These flashbacks are interpolated with the ongoing story that happens on present time and resemble the editing that made *Lost* so popular. The show would also deal with a great number of characters. In this sense, *Orange* presents many different storylines that are not part of the protagonist's, making it similar to Brazilian telenovelas, which also hold a great number of characters.

That is how Netflix uses TV serial narratives, getting elements that are well known and typical of the format, still not innovating language in a strong manner. The new experience of consumption, in which spectators would rather watch many episodes at once, can promote significant breaks of textual molds in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

From all that was analyzed before and the current media transformation scenery, we may conclude that maybe the definition of TV is going to remain blurred for a certain time and the subject needs more voices to the discussion. When it comes to Netflix, we observed that the company inserts itself in this context by offering products that do not distance themselves from TV genres to the point of needing different names, even though they do not follow the

R

flow of traditional broadcasting. It invests, as a producer, in complex narratives, making use of resources that were already successful on cable TV as a way of reaching niche audience in many platforms.

Television as a device is usually related to the idea of flow, imposing a fixed programming grid to the spectator, setting rules of what and when to watch it. Netflix rises as an alternative to these rules, taking advantage of consolidated textual recurrences of regular and cable TV in a way that its original programming is still considered TV text. Later on, however, it might promote more evident changes to the text of the TV serial narrative genre. Further research should observe how Netflix uses complex narratives to produce content that stands out aesthetically.

Depending on accessibility of internet everywhere, Netflix might, in a short amount of time, be responsible for a shift in paradigms of how the audience behaves when it comes to TV content, even though this has not led to changes in genres yet. Would it be part of one more big transformation for regular broadcast TV? It is about waiting and seeing if the platform will met the demand of users or if a quiet audience revolution will be necessary, migrating little by little to other platforms in order to access content.

Another obstacle in reformulating the platform is the way ratings are maintained; the way it operates today, TV offers daily doses of narrative to make spectators loyal. On the other hand, Netflix shows it is possible for the user to be loyal to the platform even when content becomes available all at once.

It is important to evaluate if audiences, with their many dynamics, are prepared to understand the changes and adapt to them. However, if we take Netflix subscribers as a sample, it is possible to consider that this transition would not be traumatic at all and maybe it would even encourage new levels of TV content consumption since who holds the power now is the consumer, not the broadcaster.

REFERENCES

BAUMAN, Z. *Consuming life*. Cambridge/Malden: Polity, 2007.

BERMAN, M. *All that is solid melts into air:* the experience of modernity. Nova York: Penguin, 1988.

BOLTANSKI, L.; CHIAPELLO, È. *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1999.

CASTRO, J. C. L. A publicidade contemporânea e o paradigma da perversão. *Comunicação, Mídia e Consumo*, São Paulo, v. 11, n. 30, p. 181-198, jan./abr. 2014.

DE CERTEAU, M. *L'invention du quotidien, tome 1*: *arts de faire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990.

DELEUZE, G. Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle. In: _____. *Pourparlers: 1972-1990*. Paris: Minuit, 2003. p. 240-247.

EWEN, S. *PR! A social history of spin*. Nova York: Basic Books, 1996.

FILENE, E. A. *Successful living in this machine age* (in collaboration with Charles W. Wood). Londres/Toronto: Jonathan Cape, 1932.

FOUCAULT, Michel. *Dits et écrits, II*: 1976-1988. Paris: Gallimard, 2001.

_____. *Naissance de la biopolitique: cours au Collège de France, 1978-1979*. Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2004.

FRANK, T. C. *The conquest of cool: business culture, counterculture, and the rise of hip consumerism*. Chicago/Londres: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

FRIEDAN, B. *The feminine mystique*. Nova York: W. W. Norton, 1963.

GATES, B. *The road ahead*. Nova York/Londres: Penguin, 1996.

GIDDENS, A. *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity, 1991.

HAYEK, F. A. *Individualism and economic order*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.

HUTT, W. Harold. *Economists and the public*. Londres: Jonathan Cape, 1936.

MAILER, N. The white Negro: superficial reflections on the hipster. *Dissent*, v. 4, n. 3, p. 276-293, Summer 1957.

McGREGOR, D. *The human side of enterprise*. Nova York: McGraw-Hill, 1960.

McLUHAN, M. *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. Cambridge/Londres: MIT Press, 1994.

MILLER, D. *Material culture and mass consumption*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.

PACKARD, V. *The hidden persuaders*. Nova York: Ig, 2007.

RIESMAN, D. *The lonely crowd: a study of the changing American character*. New Haven/Londres: Yale University Press, 2001.

ROSE, N. *Governing the soul: the shaping of the private self*. 2nd ed. Londres/Nova York: Free Association Books, 1999.

SMITH, A. *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, vol. 2. Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1981.

ŽIŽEK, S. *Enjoy your symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out*. Nova York/Londres: Routledge, 1992.