10. Storytelling and Mainstream Television Today – A Dialogue

John Ellis and Annie van den Oever

Watching Television as a "Working Through" of Everyday Concerns

Annie van den Oever: In several publications since the 1970s, amongst them your *Visible Fictions*, you have described watching mainstream television as a *working through* in the sense of psychoanalysis (Ellis 1982). I would like to discuss with you some new questions regarding storytelling and television, as its ongoing practice allows us to *work through* the themes which somehow bother us *today*. Mundane, mainstream television, you have argued, offers viewers an opportunity to deal with the themes that bother them, and part of the working through is to return to these over and over again. In other words, mainstream television need not be "good" by any classical standard and watching it is not necessarily fun. I recall that significant moment during the London Hands-On History Conference in February 2016, when the American cultural critic, Susan J. Douglas, said that though she *studies* contemporary American television; she absolutely does not *like* watching it; to which you replied, "That's the point!" Could you explain why "not liking television" is the point? What would you say are mainstream television's most striking elements *not to like*?

John Ellis: In my comment to Susan Douglas, I meant that an academic studying television might well not enjoy the programs they are studying. Why should a cultural critic have the right to study exclusively what they like? The point is that those programs are fun for the people who use them on an everyday basis, and this enjoyment is a social phenomenon that any academic who is seriously interested in the area of television (or any other popular medium) may well not share, but should certainly be studying. However, even if you do share the popular enjoyment, studying things sometimes "breaks" them. The "fun" evaporates once it is interrogated; the magic disappears once the mechanism of the trick is revealed. This is particularly the case with popular television forms such as Who Wants to Be a Millionaire-style game shows, celebrity-based chat shows, X-Factor-style talent competitions and other format-based entertainment, from Big Brother to The Great British Bake off. They often belong to the ephemeral historical

moment of their production and consumption, and the reconstruction of the ephemeral conjuncture can be both prolix and painstaking. You have to understand how the particular stories of the participants fitted into a broader historical moment. Yet such a reconstruction is key to understanding how and why popular television forms actually work so well when experienced spontaneously and "in the moment." These forms depend on a "currency," and belong within a specific historical moment. This currency underpins the distinctive appeal of live or "near-live" television.

AvdO: However, "working through" also suggests that there is more to it than mere "fun"?

JE: The term "working through" tries to capture the social or psychological importance of these popular forms. They are able to use humor to channel anxiety and to offer (for example, in soap operas and novelas) narratives of success and failure lived by people who are very familiar to their regular viewers. Similarly, other popular forms can offer the entertainment of ordinary people, or (increasingly) celebrities, doing something "outside their zone," dealing with everyday anxieties and problems.

A show like Strictly Come Dancing / Dancing with the Stars (broadcast since 2004) offers narratives about people learning new skills, learning to adapt to a new way of using their bodies. They have varied responses to this challenge, and their weekly progress is monitored intensively. They are shown training, experiencing problems, or even accidents, and then participating in a weekly competition which culminates in the classic climax of one "celebrity" and his or her partner "winning." Each week the candidates have to display and discuss their progress or lack thereof. They are no different from school kids in our increasingly test-and-result-oriented education system. More generally, their acquisition of dancing skills is a metaphor for one of the major concerns of modern life, the need of all citizens to adapt constantly to new circumstances: new forms of work, new and unfamiliar people, and hostile and challenging surroundings.

AvdO: You just said that, increasingly, celebrities are doing something "outside their zone," helping viewers deal with everyday anxieties and problems.

JE: The current development of shows, such as I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here to the celebrity versions of shows, such as Masterchef or Family Feud are a means of pitching celebrities into situations that are uncomfortable for them. This provides a way of working through, in an entertainment envelope, one of the more fundamental problems of modern existence: the unsettled and unsettling nature of the modern economy as it undergoes a series of technological changes, global power shifts, and a

long depression unlike any in modern times. Celebrities are taken out of their comfort zones, just as we ordinary citizens are. Their reactions are no different from ours and those of people around us. So this "working through" is both instructive and cathartic.

AvdO: Is national television the best place for dealing with such national and global problems?

JE: National television still has a most extraordinary reach and penetration into national cultures, despite all the changes wrought by new forms of delivery of television-like material. National broadcasters still matter. They may be losing audience share, but their share continues to be large and, more importantly, continues to consolidate different demographic groups into a single experience in a way that no other form of television is capable of doing. So it may not be the "best place," but it certainly is the prime place!

The concept of "working through" as I presented it in *Seeing Things* addresses the social and everyday nature of linear broadcast television, which is normally constructed around the world on a national basis. The concept seeks to explore the repetitive nature of much "ordinary TV" (as Francis Bonner put it in her excellent 2003 book *Ordinary Television*) by looking for the basis of its strength and continuing appeal. Repetition is key to TV forms in a way that is not as pronounced as other forms of storytelling in other media: the characters, settings, and scenarios are familiar, so that it is possible to concentrate on what is unfamiliar in a nonthreatening way. The disturbance or problem comes in familiar wrappers, so it is as though there is already a level of acceptance or acclimatization within the fictional universe (or the entertainment format universe). A new film or TV series requires an effort in order to acclimatize: the viewer has to get to know the characters and the rules of the diegetic world. When a "difficult social issue" is dealt with in a social problem fiction, it comes on top of all of the need to get to know and understand the characters and context. As a result, perhaps, the difficulty of the issue is emphasized by the unfamiliar context. In contrast, the soap opera or familiar format has no such problems of viewer acclimatization. There is less unfamiliar complexity at the character level (they are familiar to regular viewers), so there can be more complexity at the level of the social issues and the dilemmas that they pose.

Soap operas are a safe area in which the unsafe or the unfamiliar can be explored. Indeed, all stories are safe areas of risk where we can see and experience events that would be intolerable in real life. In fictional stories, there's no problem with murder, extreme jeopardy, etc. In fact there is considerable pleasure in being able to play, in a narrative context, with such taboos and terrors. Different genres of storytelling balance the elements of

safety and risk in their own particular ways. Physical jeopardy, for instance, can be much greater in horror or crime genres, but these genres find it difficult to integrate the emotional anxieties which are usually stirred up in melodramas and soap operas.

AvdO: You just argued that historical and contextual reconstruction are key to understanding how and why popular television forms actually work so well when experienced spontaneously and "in the moment." Can you give an example of such reconstruction?

JE: I undertook a reconstruction of this kind when writing about the crisis of trust in the documentary genre which occurred around the turn of the century. This was published as "Documentary and Truth on Television" in 2005. This required trying to find the popular discussions that took place in this presocial media era about "Did you really believe that show last night?" I tried to find evidence from the talk of radio DJs, but that isn't archived; I looked for the interviews conducted by various researchers at the time, but they weren't archived (scandalously); so, in the end, I returned to the familiar sources of newspapers and TV itself. But the excavation of that moment seems to succeed well enough to be able to explain a verifiable shift in terms of the way in which documentaries were made and how they tried to address the concerns of their viewers through increased self-reflexivity.

AvdO: Would you perhaps say that some parts of your ADAPT project, though not aiming at audience research but at the reconstruction of the BBC's production circumstances in the earlier days, may be valuable for such reconstructions in the future?

JE: The practices of "hands-on history" show that having the concrete objects and circumstances of production produces very different memories in the participants, and enables them to demonstrate aspects of what they did in a way that: (a) they would not normally articulate; and (b) brings forward the group dynamics with regard to work. In terms of applying this hands-on approach to what people did when they watched TV (rather than its industrialized production), the work of Helen Wheatley, Rachel Moseley, and Helen Wood (2012) seems to have gone in the same direction, especially their Pop-Up TV shop.

Television Is the New Cinema

AvdO: Some television scholars have claimed that so-called quality television from the heyday of HBO onward added considerably to the mainstream storytelling practices in television, adding complexity in terms of characters

and narrators, plot lines, story twists, multilayered narrative structures, and the like. As a result, viewing practices changed, as did the audiences that television was able to attract after the 1990s, as Jason Mittell has argued in his essay on "narrative complexity" (Mittell 2006). The changes on the production side and in the television series themselves, as well as the audience responses he observed, were not strictly an American phenomenon. As to the audience: HBO series have been watched worldwide and viewers have responded to them, often on fan pages. Would you say that these changes in storytelling and viewing practices have affected mainstream television's audiences in some way? If so, are there indications that this affected the ways in which viewers watch mainstream television today? Have they perhaps "gone meta"?

JE: The development of multistranded narration dates back to Hill Street Blues (1981-1987), which is discussed in Todd Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time* ([1983] 2000) and the subsequent work of Stephen Bochco, David E. Kelley and others (e.g., NYPD Blue, 1993-2005). This was broadcast TV's first moment of responding to the growth of new forms of suppliers: the beginning of the age of availability as I put it (in *Seeing Things*). Others (e.g., Henderson 2007) have identified this tendency as a "soapisation" of television drama, with the development not only of multiple plots and general sophistication but also story strands hanging over from episode to episode, sometimes disappearing and reappearing some time later, as I demonstrated in a short essay on NYPD Blue (Ellis 2007). This was a development of television narration that exploited the regular episode pattern and was intended, from a business perspective, to develop customer loyalty. Creatively, it allowed greater character and storytelling sophistication in a way that fitted with the increasingly fragmented patterns of US network broadcasting.

It is interesting that HBO borrowed this newly developed form and continued using it, despite its lack of commercial breaks. Even more interesting was that subsequent nonlinear on-demand enterprises like Netflix have made this kind of narrative TV the cornerstone of their bid for world domination. It is a more industrial form of television production requiring teams of writers, as the Danish experiment with writers' rooms has also proved (Redvall 2013). This development has provided problems for some TV cultures more used to the cult of the individual writer, as in the UK. It is impossible to think of Dennis Potter in a writers' room, of course; but a younger writer such as Paul Abbott (Shameless, State of Play, No Offence) has experimented with team writing to develop and extend his initial series formats.

Generally, multistranded drama is a form of confident and expansive narration that has become relatively general for high-end television fiction.

This creates a class of fiction that is quite distinct from the form of the classical feature film, and has more in common with the three-decker novels of the nineteenth century (many of which, not uncoincidentally, were also first issued in weekly episodes). The multistranded narrative allows for many more incidental and seemingly accidental "in between" moments of a narrative, allowing writers to explore more of the implications and by-ways of the scenario than would be possible within a tighter feature-film format. I would say the multistranded narrative offers a very different kind of complexity from that of the puzzle film or the "complex" film. You could say that it exhausts more of the possibilities of the characters, situations, and themes. That it incorporates more of the feel of how everyday events take place, in a rather meandering way, always already embedded in a much larger set of happenings and concerns that the characters actually share, with events repercussing on one another. This is conveyed in a TV drama such as HAPPY VALLEY (2014-), where an awful lot goes on that is not really relevant to the plot, but which is crucial to the state of mind of the main characters, and therefore how they deal with the events thrown at them by the main plot.

The "Less Waste" Storytelling Model

AvdO: Many nineteenth-century novels were first published in the newspapers, piece by piece, as serials or *feuilletons* as they were called in the French newspapers, although this term has acquired different meanings in other cultures. In his 2006 book *The Way Hollywood Tells It,* David Bordwell argued that a wave of complex narratives emerged after the major popular success of PULP FICTION in 1994, although he also noted that twice before, Hollywood had seen such a wave: between 1940 and 1955; and from the mid-1960s till the early 1970s. The third wave, from 1994 onward, Bordwell attributes to product differentiation between independent filmmakers. In her 2006 introduction to a special double issue of *Film Criticsm* on Complex Narration, Janet Staiger (2006) argued along similar lines: that among the "torrent" of complex narratives, *product differentiation* was important, especially facing the competition from quality television series, but also given the "manipulability" of a film's linear flow through DVDs' random access, which was also discussed by Laura Mulvey in her chapter on the "possessive viewer" in *Death 24x a Second* (2006). You have discussed the differences between cinema and television on a number of occasions, for instance in "Cinema and Television: Laios and Oedipus" (Ellis 1998). How

do you view the development of complexity within the context of quality television?

JE: Quality TV has a lot to do with the narrative complexity and character development (particularly of secondary characters) that serial space allows. But it is also a matter of the level of investment in production values … in the creation of a complex and believable diegetic world that is inhabited by these characters. This costs money. And, as John Caldwell has pointed out in *Televisuality* (1995), high-end fiction in the US comes with the development of distinctive "looks" for the big drama series of the 1990s. This was a time when linear TV could command huge financial resources because of its concentration within a relatively small number of suppliers: the main television networks.

Things have changed economically since then, with many more ways of accessing and financing television but, once again, we are experiencing (and some say more than ever) a boom in TV drama/fiction series production. There are several factors contributing to this. One is the continuing storytelling crisis in the Hollywood fiction film, where big-budget cinema has seen little or nothing new for the best part of two decades, and middle-range narrative films have become increasingly difficult to finance and get made. "Television is the new cinema" is a regular refrain from a certain type of director and writer (such as Mike Figgis in Britain) and was even the subject of a *New Yorker* debate in 2012 (Remnick et al. 2012). Television fiction is also the new cinema because it is in some instances commanding feature film budgets. This was the infamous claim made for the Netflix series The Crown (2016-). It offers good creative economy: why waste good characters and scenarios on one self-contained text, when you can stretch them over eight or even eighty episodes? Why waste money on promoting a new concept when the old one still works? In this sense, The Crown has even more finance than a medium budget feature film, because all the money shows on the screen, rather than the huge share of a feature film budget that goes toward marketing. Even Hollywood has tried to emulate this new "less waste" storytelling model by making its series of superhero movies. But the longest series of feature films so far is the Bond series, weighing in at a current 26 movies since 1962 – about the same as the average season of NYPD Blue or Grey's Anatomy (2005-).

In television, the current fiction boom is also fuelled by new entrants into the market, some of which, like Netflix, aim to be global disruptors. Netflix is in many ways the Uber of television. That's a different argument, but the aggressive presence of Netflix, Amazon, and the others, accessing different forms of finance than traditional TV, has increased the sheer amount of quality drama being produced at the moment.

AvdO: What changes in the forms or genres of stories currently being told on TV do you observe, if indeed any?
JE: The main change is that television drama storytelling tends to be made for a longer period of active consumption than previously. It has less "currency." Some of the role of what was once "for the moment" TV drama has now been taken by narratively driven reality and challenge shows. Drama is pretty explicitly constructed now for "boxset" viewing, for binge-watching, or watching in the user's own time and convenience.

Television Viewing Is the New Cinema Viewing

AvdO: In "Cinema and Television: Laios and Oedipus," you argued that "[t]elevision narration learned more from Joseph von Sternberg than it did from Howard Hawks or John Ford. Television narration has a certain fetishism about it: it is condemned to repeat rather than to move forward" (Ellis 1998, 131-132). Do you still take this view?
JE: This is a complex and shifting situation, where it is dangerous to make huge generalizations in the way that I did in *Visible Fictions* back in 1982. The increase in television production values has had a pronounced effect, combined with the greater control that users now have over how they consume television. Even in 1982, when I tried to distinguish between the different visual regimes of television and cinema using the idea of glance versus gaze, I was careful to say that television could well support (and did support) much more sustained forms of concentrated "gazing" just like cinema. Huge screens, high definition, and personal control over scheduling have all brought us to a situation where "television viewing is the new cinema viewing" – but then cinema viewing has also changed greatly over this period.

There have been other developments too which have complexified how television tells its stories. The key TV form of the situation comedy has also changed in a narration-driven direction. Sitcom has long been the least "current" of TV genres: it is the one genre where repeats (a much-hated practice in the days of linear TV) were always tolerated, and often even welcomed. Now sitcoms, under the influence of US sitcoms, have begun to incorporate narrative developments and substantial changes in the scenario and the places of characters. Take the US sitcom Modern Family (2009 to present, 9 seasons so far) as an example. The child actors grow up; their characters change; they pass through the education system, etc. Their anchoring character flaws remain, still motivating the comedic scenarios and

providing the eternal conflicts. But this is sitcom where time elapses over a series, and characters live with the consequences of their previous actions in a way that was not the case for earlier iterations of the sitcom genre.

AvdO: Would you say that there is a difference in terms of the themes surfacing for a "working through" in complex television and mainstream television today?

JE: As is clear, I don't make a distinction between complex and mainstream television. The mainstream is very often more complex than it first appears.

AvdO: Concerning the practices of viewing television today: how important are recent changes in TV as an apparatus or a setup (or the *dispositif* as theorized in film studies) for watching TV in the home situation? Do you think there have been significant changes in home viewing practices created by new technologies such as large screen, HDTV, and so on?

JE: The main change on the production side is the breaking of the single mechanism of linear TV as the sole form of delivery. Linear TV still remains dominant in most markets, and the single most important source of TV program production. But there are disruptive challengers at work even in that area.

In addition to linear TV, we have user-driven online TV provision, some of it provided by the traditional suppliers of linear TV, "the broadcasters." They allow users to access a defined amount of material by streaming for a defined amount of time. There is very little on offer that is the equivalent of the DVD, something that you can download for good. So the mechanism is still a temporary one … you get the stuff when they allow you to have it. It is still essentially the same mechanism as linear broadcast TV: the offer is "you can have it when we say you can have it." The only difference is that the time of availability is stretched out for a few weeks or months. Programs still disappear, or are unavailable, as anyone who teaches TV well knows, and consumers are increasingly beginning to find out. It's all right if you belong to the generations for whom Friends (1994-2004) is a comfort blanket, but pretty much anything else disappears after most of its market value has been nearly exhausted.

In terms of the setup that users may choose today, streaming or time-limited downloading allows people to watch TV material on any available screen (smartphone, tablet, PC), and anywhere where there is an electricity supply to top up batteries (on public transport, in the bath, on the beach, at work, while watching linear TV, while on Facebook, etc.). The phenomena of split and dispersed attention that I tried to capture with the ideas of "glance" and "gaze" in *Seeing Things* still seem to apply in this new situation. In fact, the new forms enable dispersed attention even more. And so we continue to

see forms of TV which build into themselves the expectation of dispersed attention watching. The regular recapitulations of most reality shows are a good example of this. Constructed initially to deal with frequent commercial breaks, they have proved ideal for coping with the dispersed and interrupted attention that is equally an aspect of the new "view anywhere" culture.

The real problem in this new *dispositif* is that of choice (from the viewer's perspective) and the management of consumer choice (from the supply side). Linear TV schedules are a very good way of managing supply and demand: they offer a relatively manageable supply of new material, which will instantly gain a certain cultural currency. You "hear about" new TV, and people are talking about new TV, both in other media outlets and socially. But when it comes to choosing something in the new *dispositif* or mechanism of nonlinear supply, the choice is both daunting and disappointing. The interfaces offer brief descriptions that all sound the same, because they leave out the accidentals and the incidentals that provide much of the pleasure of fiction. They arrange into genres which are very generic. They attempt to learn who you are, and tailor their offer to you, without seeming to understand that entertainment is as much about escaping who you are and what you have done, rather than about confirming those aspects of the self. And finally, there is just too much stuff to handle. This is also the reason why so much is taken away from consumers after a while. In theory, digital television archives can allow endless backlists, but in practice this is not the case. The abundance cannot be handled by consumers because it would be a chaotic abundance. Choice management (both for providers and for users) is a new problem and it is proving extremely difficult to solve.

And to illustrate further just some of the many choices presented to the consumer and some of the related problems looming for the broadcasters, the new *dispositif* also brings new problems in terms of image size, shape, and definition. Something made for HD widescreen viewing on a premium-price TV will also be watched on a PC or a handheld device, and so has to be decipherable and pleasurable on all these scales and shapes. Equally, within the industry, the question of file formats is a major headache. There are over a hundred delivery formats in current use across the world for different outlets and platforms. Ensuring that quality (image and sound quality, that is) is not overly compromised in format transfer is a continuing problem. This kind of problem replicates the old one of broadcast TV: what you send out is not necessarily what the audience will be seeing on their individual TV or phone or tablet screens, all of which are set up differently (just as individual analog TV all differed). In reality, the TV *dispositif* still remains rather less clear and perfect than as it is often idealized by both industry

leaders and academics. It is a rather messy and compromised thing, and so, from a technological point of view, most of what is made remains within the "safe area" of what is guaranteed to work … just as it was in the analog era.

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