Seismo

Ursula Ganz-Blättler. "Signs of time: Cumulative narrative in broadcast television fiction." Wien, Zürich: LIT, 2018, pp. 352. ISBN 978-3-643-80273-6

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TV series are one of the very few "traditional" media formats that continue to thrive in the current media landscape. In Europe, the format of TV series (i. e. serial audio-visual fictional narratives) has been surging for some time in terms of numbers of suppliers and consumers, as well as in shares of distributors' offerings and consumers' media use. Homegrown high-end original productions have become "calling cards" for suppliers active in the European market(s). Subscription-based, pay-per-view, and advertising-based networks, as well as public service suppliers order and finance serial fiction. International players like Netflix, HBO, Sky, and Amazon invest in original (co-) productions in many countries. From a media economic perspective, the market entry of more and more "big tech" and conglomerate players into the production and distribution of TV series is another indicator of the importance of the product TV series. The success of the format warrants extensive investigation. Nevertheless, compared to, e. g., cinema, "new" media, and political communication, the attention of scholars in communication/media science and other disciplines still seems surprisingly modest, particularly in Europe. Some noteworthy European works on fictional TV series are Schlütz (2016), Redvall (2013), Gormász (2015), and the scientific journal *Series – International Journal of TV Serial Narratives* (series.unibo.it). Ursula Ganz's work *Signs of Time* was accepted as a habilitation thesis in 2009, and an adapted form was published in 2018. The thesis thus represents somewhat of a European premiere in discussing in great detail and depth what the term "(audiovisual) cumulative narrative" entails and how the central feature of accumulation impacts the analysis of narrative as communication and reflective stance.

Ganz-Blättler had a background in medieval history and film science before she ventured into television science, criticism, and history. The author focuses in this well-written and highly interesting habilitation thesis on investigating cumulative narrative in broadcast television fiction. The term "broadcast television" has an outdated ring in the current media landscape. However, the adaptability of serial audiovisual fiction to varying distribution forms and its marketability for increasingly dominant over-the-top suppliers ensure that Ganz-Blättler's work retains a high degree of relevance. The author discusses episodic fiction in the first two main parts of her book as communication and as art, respectively. In the third main part, she discusses the cumulative narrative as episodic fiction. In the latter part, Ganz-Blättler reviews three U. S. TV series to support and illustrate her arguments. The author admits to an original, spectacularly unscientific, yet sympathetic inspiration for her habilitation thesis: she wants to see the U. S. TV series *Magnum P.I.* be acknowledged as one of the best ever primetime TV series. Original work on TV series is often already outdated at the time of publication. The production, distribution, content, and consumption of serial audiovisual fiction develop rapidly in various directions. Ganz-Blättler writes an addendum to her conclusions that briefly discusses some of the current developments in the (Swiss) TV series landscape.

In *Signs of Time*, Ganz-Blättler states that she is inspired by, and builds primarily on, the work of Horace Newcomb, who delineates storytelling as referencing events and episodes in the past. Diegetic memory of characters, and of actively processing recipients, then becomes a strategic tool for sustaining (and expanding) the established fictional worlds. In addition, the theoretical framework of the thesis draws upon Bakthin's pluralistic dialogue perspective on communication, upon cultural studies' multiplicity of viewpoints and shifting power relations, as well as upon Luhman's system's theory. McQuail (2010, pp. 19–20) names (post-) structural and cultural perspectives as important alternatives to the classical communication science approach that has its roots in (primarily quantitative methods-based) social sciences. The cultural approach is, finds McQuail, mainly employed in the investigation of meaning, social contexts, and cultural experiences. The author (2010, pp. 13–14) states that the core basis of cultural theory is often "ideational". Ganz-Blättler investigates cumulative narrative in great depth and seeks to apply quality criteria to cultural products based on consistent argumentation. In successfully doing so, the work illustrates once more that the cultural approach, as McQuail (2010, p. 20) states, can evoke important insights for media planners and producers. In Ganz-Blättler's view, storytelling satisfies essential needs of human beings as "a fundamental intrinsically motivating communication operation that societies rely upon in order to a) articulate aspects of belonging in time and space and b) make sense of our fragile, and necessarily precarious existence" (2018, p. xi). In addition, the relevance of storytelling, and thus of the habilitation thesis, lies in the underlying assumption that narrative communication is "by default media-savvy, participatory and highly reflexive" (2018, p. xiii).

After a personal and informative introduction, the first part of the habilitation thesis is devoted to episodic fiction as communication. This section consists of Chapters 2 through 6, which convey the important aspects of episodic fiction from various perspectives. After a segment dedicated to relevant theorists, Chapter 3 illuminates the concept of episodic narrative as communication and its workings. Chapter 4 is entitled "Episodic Fiction as Entertaining Communication" and covers, broadly speaking, the recipients' perspective, the reception and processing of episodic fiction. For readers interested in media economics, management, and the production and distribution of TV series, Chapters 5 and 6 are of great interest. Aspects of episodic fiction relatable to medial commodity culture (cf. Hesmondhalg, 2012) and cost disease, cross-media ownership, various distribution modes and access, as well as conventions and genres figure prominently in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 discusses episodic fiction as, simply put, a broadcasting (industry) "good" and investigates broadcasting models, TV storytelling, TV as a medium and an industry in transition, episodic series and continuous serials, and three main eras of prime-time drama. Ganz-Blättler's book shows in these chapters some overlap with studies by Lotz (2014), Mittell (2015) and Schlütz (2016). Ganz-Blättler's original work, however, predates the latter two studies, and it offers a great depth of theory-guided investigation of episodic fiction, in addition to sophisticated and at times humorous and self-ironic writing.

In investigating the complex development and production of episodic fictional TV series, it is a common trap to attribute the quality of an admired TV series to its creation by "brilliant" individuals. The content of a TV series is to an extent indeed assignable to its "showrunner". From a media sociology perspective, however, these main creators (head writers, producers) create content as part of larger teams (writers, producers, directors, actors, etc.) with certain characteristics and attributes that exercise strong influence on the content of the series (cf. Phalen & Osselame, 2012; Redvall, 2013). In addition, storytelling formulas of established genres of TV series influence content, as Ganz-Blättler explains. The main creators and their teams are often attached to a production

company that inevitably enables, as well as restrains, mediation in TV series. Crucially, the production company is commissioned and remunerated by a distributor or broadcaster that exerts, as Verhoeven (2019) finds, a decisive influence on what is mediated in a series. Regarding influences from outside media organizations, the decision-making on content of a broadcaster / distributor is itself impacted by the rapidly changing TV / media landscape, markets, advertising, regulations, etc. Finally, the basic conditions for the functioning of any media system and the content of its products are shaped by the encompassing social, economic, political, cultural, national, and global "system" (cf. Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, for a hierarchical model of the enabling and restraining influences on media content, and Verhoeven, 2019, for deployment of this model to TV series). Ganz-Blättler walks a delicate tightrope between a focus on creation of content by individuals and attention to the numerous possible extraneous influences on TV series. To illustrate the argument further regarding some topics of Ganz-Blättler's book, the innovation in TV series in the "network" era (e.g., *Hill Street Blues*, *St. Elsewhere*) is surely the work of several talented creators and their soon-to-be-legendary independent production companies. However, the broadcaster that finances the innovative new series was (often) driven by losses in market shares: the third-rated network amongst CBS, ABC, and NBC was forced to display a penchant for risk. In the same vein, the drive for continuous series is also an effect of suppliers attempting to bind customers to their platform. In evaluating scripts and progressions of the production of a TV series, Netflix focuses almost exclusively on the elements in scripts that incite viewers to continue watching, as Verhoeven (2019) infers from interviews with creators of TV series. The trend towards cumulative storytelling is also an effect (as well as a cause) of the surge in binge-watching that is in turn enabled by the introduction of a string of new technologies (first VCR, then digital hard copies, and finally web-streaming). The demand for content

that incites customer loyalty in the TV series market has been increasing steadily for decades due to the emergence of competitive additional content-hungry suppliers (first cable / satellite TV, then web-based suppliers), and large increases in pay TV consumption. Attributing a surge in, e.g., continuous series and multilinear storytelling, to several brilliant creators is a seductive, but simplistic, argument. The TV landscape opened to innovative types of content for many reasons worthy of consideration and further investigation.

Art can perhaps be regarded as communication with its own intrinsic goals. However, after discussing episodic fiction as communication, Ganz-Blättler names the second main part of the habilitation thesis "Episodic Fiction as Art". This part consists of two chapters. In the first, Ganz-Blättler discusses what one might call the narration choreography, the timing or the rhythm of episodic TV fiction as composed by omissions, segments, acts, beats, and story arcs. The next chapter describes the developments towards the serialized series and the multilinearity of TV series, a road map towards what Mittell (2015) labels "complex TV", the type of TV series that critics and scholars often regard as the most recent (or the one and only) highlight of the format. The commonly acknowledged "canon" of TV series is the culmination of the developments that Ganz-Blättler discusses. Most often canonized are *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Mad Men*. These series demonstrate the completion of the transition of TV series from lowest-common-denominator mass entertainment products (mainly consumed by females) that (allegedly) merely serve to deliver an audience to advertisers, to meaningful, engaging, and challenging products of art. These TV series are similar to, and of the same value as, high-brow cinema, theatre, and literature. The appreciation of an upscaling of TV series after 1998 rests on many valid arguments, including Ganz-Blättler's. However, the largely deprecating connotations surrounding pre-1995 TV series, as well as the positive verdict on post-1998 TV series, display overtones of gender and

class bias. In short, if many educated middle-class males also consume the product, it must be a serious high-quality good. In the same chapter, Ganz-Blättler finds – long before many other authors – that the dichotomy between episodic series and continuous serials is no longer tenable; she perceives a continuum between the two extremes along which TV series can be located. Among others, Schlütz (2016) arrives at the same conclusion.

The third part of the thesis is entitled "The Cumulative Narrative as Episodic Fiction". It consists of three chapters and a conclusion. The conclusion is rather short because many topical findings are presented in the various chapters. In this part, Ganz-Blättler gracefully rounds out her arguments by exemplifying in secondary analyses the developments in the cumulative narratives of three U.S. TV series: *Magnum P.I.*, *Six Feet Under*, and *The X-Files*. The series *Magnum P.I.*, for example, developed from loosely connected episodic tales of a rogue character into a more intimate, continuing (serialized) story about a complex human character with (hurtful, mostly Vietnam war-related) memories and backstories that are mediated to the viewers, who then actively process and elaborate on the stories. Ganz-Blättler (2018, p. 279) finds that "cumulative narratives allow for the serialization of episodic fiction". Pertaining to the post-1998 canon of TV series, Ganz-Blättler offers a refreshing and relativizing finding: diegetic memory as traditionally deployed in daytime soap operas was successfully adopted in "more classical adventure stories within the prime time schedule of TV II and TV III as 'neo' television".

The customary division between information and entertainment concealed that "entertainment influences our longterm values, the norms we obey in everyday life and the stereotypes we hold about other people or certain social spheres', von Rimscha and Siegert write (2011, p. 1010). Obviously, the narrative space of TV series is large: whereas a cinema film equals a novella, a TV series compares to an epic novel. This abundant space enables the inclusion, and perhaps more importantly, the repetition of (intentional, socio-political, or other) messages (Nesselhauf & Schleich, 2014). Eilders and Nitsch (2015) find socio-political messages frequently mediated in entertainment offerings. The authors infer that fiction successfully circumvents the selection barriers of recipients. Holbert et al. (2003, p. 430) see political communication and (fictional) entertainment closely intertwined and find that many Americans are unable to distinguish between fact and fiction. Among investigations of entertainment in general and fictional TV series in particular, the aspect of biased portrayals of societal groups and topics is an increasingly prominent theme. Scholars often focus on mediation pertaining to the main social segregators: class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Whereas the (distorted) portrayals of gender and ethnicity were (and are) for all the right reasons frequently investigated (e. g., Ault, 2013; Brook, 2009; Kanter, 2010; Kim, 2001; McRobbie, 2012; Rogers, 2011; Thomas, 2012; Warner, 2015), and the analysis of the portrayal of sexuality is gaining more prominence along with a string of TV series with LGBTQ main characters (e. g., Becker, 2013; Cavalcante, 2015; Frei, 2011; Renga, 2018), the analysis of the monumentally biased portrayal of class is still lagging (cf. Verhoeven, 2019). Forty years of neoliberal education "policies" and ideological brainwashing have ensured that the lower classes are severely underrepresented in the workforce as well as in the products of science and media. For inspired work on the portrayals of class in TV series, the contributions in Deery and Press (2018) come highly recommended. Ganz-Blättler (2018, p. xiii) regards the narrating of entertaining (cumulative) stories as a "discordant form of conversation, that is precarious, […] open-ended and ambivalent. […] In consequence I do not consider narratives to be 'neutral' or innocent since they can just as well build trust as lead astray, can courageously denounce mistakes and point out wrongdoings as they may obfuscate some truth and reinforce existing social taboos and power relations". It is an author's prerogative to select and prioritize, and Ganz-Blättler does

not elaborate (much) on distortions present in the content of episodic TV fiction.

In conclusion, Ganz-Blättler draws upon an impressive basis of theories and manages to offer her readers many important insights that entail "everything one always wanted to know" about the meaning, working, functions, effects, and thus the importance of, cumulative narrative as episodic fiction. The author eloquently delivers the information with an admirable passion for the subject of fictional TV series. The enviable enthusiasm in her writing can be traced back to the period of inception and writing of the thesis, i. e., the last phases of a very fruitful era of innovation in TV series in which one highlight after another was realised. Saving the most important observation for last: Ganz-Blättler's work gloriously achieves many of its objectives, but assigning *Magnum P.I.* the status of a classic is really too much to ask of a fan of *The Wire*.

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