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4 Contemporary Quality TV

The Entertainment Experience of Complex Serial Narratives

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Lately, so-called quality TV series have been extremely successful—both in terms of audience shares and critical acclaim. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to define the concept of quality serial television, giving a brief history of its development, systematizing its characteristics, and modeling the entertainment experience. I will argue that quality TV as a culturally bound, discursive construct functions as a meta-genre with concrete implications for selection, experience and possible effects of entertaining quality TV. This argument is summarized in a model of the quality TV entertainment experience.

A decade ago, Lucy Mazdon wrote in a book about (then) contemporary television series: "All of this—the quality of these programmes, their critical and commercial success and the questions they raise about the status of television, national industries and audiences—makes the contemporary prime-time television series/serial ripe for serious analysis" (Mazdon, 2005, pp. 4–5). Although being a decade old, this assessment has still not been put into practice—at least not by communication studies. Most of the scientific discourses dealing with complex quality television are rooted in the humanities (like film and television studies) and evolve around the texts themselves without linking them to comprehension and reception processes or possible effects (e.g., Jancovich & Lyons, 2003; Leverette, Ott, & Buckley, 2008; McCabe & Akass, 2007). Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to address this gap by defining the concept of quality serial television, giving a brief history of its development, systematizing its characteristics, and modeling the entertainment experience. I will argue that quality TV as a culturally bound, discursive construct functions as a meta-genre with concrete implications for selection, experience, and possible effects of entertaining quality TV. This argument is summarized in a model of the quality TV entertainment experience (for a more comprehensive discussion see Schlütz, in press).

Quality TV Series: Concept, History, and Characteristics

Lately, so-called quality TV series like *The Sopranos, The Wire,* or *Breaking Bad* have been extremely successful—both in terms of audience shares (Ernesto, 2013; Hibberd, 2013; Nielsen, 2014; Woollacott, 2014) and critical acclaim

(Nussbaum, 2009). These programs stand out due to their multi-level complexity, high production values, innovative cinematic techniques, and autonomous viewing habits. I will go into these characteristics in more detail below. Before doing so, however, I will clarify my understanding of serial television and its categories and describe the development of quality TV in the USA.

Serial Television: Definition and Taxonomy

Serial narratives are a "reigning principle of cultural production" (Dyer, 2002, p. 71). Since the early soap operas (Cantor & Pingree, 1983) both fictional and non-fictional formats have been the default of television content constituting its flow (Williams, 1974) and filling most of its program schedules (Creeber, 2004, p. 4). This chapter focuses on fictional (mostly dramatic) content although serial storytelling is not confined to it. However, as fictional narratives are processed somewhat differently from facts (Green, Garst, & Brock, 2004) this will help to clarify the argument. A *narrative* is an account of events bound by causality (Carroll, 2007). As opposed to single films, series are ongoing stories implying characteristics like lack of definite closure, use of cliffhangers, and sparse expositions (Allrath, Gymnich, & Surkamp, 2005, p. 3). Potential openness is an important aspect as it fosters audience engagement (Geraghty, 1981, p. 11) although some types of series strive for narrative closure (see below). In the following, a TV series/serial will be understood as a segmented sequence of confined but linked (fictional) films. By interlacing individual episodes in terms of form (time slot, opening credits, and theme), content (cast, plot, and setting), and structure (composition of story lines) a continuous narrative with an open structure is formed.

TV series can be distinguished according to their narrative structure in episodic series and continuous serials (Cantor & Pingree, 1983; Creeber, 2004; Ndalianis, 2005). (Note: I will use the term 'series' in the remainder of the chapter to denote serial narratives in general.) This differentiation is not a dichotomous one. Rather, one finds varying degrees of seriality as a function of character development and plot openness (Bock, 2013, p. 38). One can distinguish at least the following four types:

Anthology Series

Anthologies are a loose connection of episodes only bound by an overlaying theme (e.g., *ToonHeads, The Canterbury Tales*). They used to be a very popular serial form on the radio. Nowadays anthologies are rather rare.

Episodic Series

Series in the strict sense are shows like *Magnum, P.I., South Park,* or *The Simpsons* where every episode is more or less independent of each other. The narrative arcs are confined to one episode and there is hardly any character development.

The pure form of the series has become rather rare on contemporary television as well. More recent series like *Sherlock* or *Dexter* combine episodic plots (with a "murder of the week") and backstory arcs spreading across seasons or even the series as a whole (like Dexter's hunt for the Ice Truck Killer in Season 1). Newcomb (2004) termed this form cumulative narrative (p. 422). It has the advantage of appealing to both single-episode and regular viewers.

Continuous Serials

Serials tell an ongoing story with a (more or less) constant cast. They address the regular viewer. Examples are *Lost, The Wire,* or *The Killing*. Typical serial forms are sitcoms (*Modern Family*) or soap operas with an at least potentially indefinite run-time (*Dallas*). At any given time, old and new story lines are interwoven to keep the narrative running. Some serials like telenovelas (*Ugly Betty*) strive for narrative closure, though. Despite their name, miniseries (*Roots, True Detective*) can be subsumed into this category as well, because they tell an ongoing story, albeit in a predetermined and usually rather small number of episodes. Since the advent of the second season, though, *True Detective* is often termed an anthology.

Hybrid Forms

More complex shows like *ER* oscillate between long-term story arcs and stand-alone episodes (Mittell, 2006, p. 33). Nelson (2007) termed this form *flexi-narrative*. The line to cumulative narratives (see above) is somewhat blurred but many flexi-narratives strive for closure (like *Breaking Bad, Mad Men,* or *Boardwalk Empire*). These shows are not terminated for decreasing audience ratings but because the story has come to an end. This interplay between the demands of episodic and serial storytelling is "the hallmark of narrative complexity" (Mittell, 2006, p. 33). Quality TV series are usually flexi-narratives.

The Third Golden Age of Television: The Development of Quality TV

The label "quality television" was coined by US-American TV-critics in the mid-1970s with regard to shows like *Rich Man, Poor Man* and *Hill Street Blues*. Although it was not very well defined what quality television was, "people just seemed to know it when they saw it" (Thompson, 1996, pp. 12–13). Quality TV as a logo today marks a specific cultural status of television content (Newman & Levine, 2012, p. 21) as opposed to conventional television ("It's not TV, it's HBO"). Quality TV is complex television: It is intricate, complicated, and perplexing (Buckland, 2009, p. 3). It is demanding in terms of content, aesthetically ambitious and therefore attractive for certain target groups—it is both art and merchandise (Bignell, 2007). In this sense, the term quality TV functions as a unique selling proposition (USP; Nowell-Smith, 1994) in

first-order market relations where goods are sold directly to the customer (Rogers, Epstein, & Reeves, 2002). From a distributor's point of view the label quality TV functions as a brand, from an audience's perspective it serves as a meta-genre (see below). Both aspects are a result (or a by-product) of the transformations that the US-American television market has undergone in the last 50 years (cf. Jenkins, 2008; Lotz, 2007). These changes fed back into financing, production, distribution, marketing, but also media use and content reception. Namely the rise of the pay TV channels (first and foremost HBO) was of paramount importance for the advent of quality TV productions like *The Sopranos* or *The Wire*. For analytical purposes, U.S. television history can be divided in distinct phases that are described below (Rogers et al., 2002, p. 48; see also Kompare, 2006; Reeves, Rodgers [*sic*], & Epstein, 1996; Reeves, Rogers, & Epstein, 2007; Santo, 2008).

TV I

The era of mass marketing (ca. 1950–1978) was dominated by the programming decisions of the three major networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC. They decided what was produced and broadcasted, aiming at the biggest audience possible (up to 90 percent combined market shares; Edgerton, 2008). In TV I, quality equaled popularity. A show like *Little House on the Prairie* is a good example for a then popular show. The market logic was an indirect one, audiences were "sold" to marketers; the more eyeballs, the better. Respect for advertisers and the need for syndication (as the two main sources of revenue; Kompare, 2009) favored shallow content and episodic formats. Innovative programs were not in demand: "The reluctance to innovate stemmed from the network executives' belief that the mass audience would immediately reject any show departing from the lowest-common denominator norm." (Pearson, 2005, p. 13)

TV II

The following phase (ca. 1978–1995) was distinguished by a multi-channel transition and corresponding niche marketing. Due to technological changes—like the introduction of the VCR and cable channels—the audience (or certain segments) gained autonomy in terms of time, space, and content. Furthermore, the audience grew more powerful because the market logic changed (at least partly) to a first-order relation: Viewers could purchase media content (more or less) directly by subscribing to a specific pay TV channel. As a whole, the market changes led to audience segmentation and the establishment of high-quality niche content with series like *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere* (Thompson, 1996). Cable and satellite channels used their structural advantages (mainly independence from advertising) and legal pros (freedom from the NAB television code) for the production and distribution of quality shows (Creeber, 2004; Edgerton & Jones, 2008; Kelso, 2008). Additionally, the FCC Financial Interest and Syndication (fin-syn) Rules established in 1970 prevented the

networks from owning any of the prime-time programming they aired. This breakup of vertical integration fostered the rise of independent production firms like MTM Enterprises that became "the modern cradle of quality television" (Martin, 2013, p. 171). These firms established new story telling modes like the flexi-narrative (Nelson, 1997, p. 32). It was also the beginning of the era of the writer-producer (Pearson, 2005) that was accompanied by greater artistic freedom in content and style. These *auteurs* or showrunners like Alan Ball (*Six Feet Under*), Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*), and Vince Gilligan (*Breaking Bad*), to name but a few, stand for aesthetic integrity. They are both "brand manager" and "lonely genius" (Newman & Levine, 2012, p. 54), merging art and business in their work.

TV III

The post-network era (ca. 1995–2010) was shaped by digitalization and media convergence. Its focus lay on brand marketing in order to build "value around specific narrative worlds, characters and personalities, seeking to encourage audience loyalty to these products" (Hills, 2007, p. 52). Due to the advent of new media, users became even more autonomous in terms of time, space, and devices. Thus, their relation to the producers and distributors changed. Comparable to other entertainment markets (like books or films) popularity now became "a function of satisfying the desires of the audience, rather than caring to the needs of advertisers" (Rogers et al., 2002, p. 46). Quality content—often distinguished by a "signature style" (C. Johnson, 2005, p. 64)—that matched the specific taste of discrete audience groups became a USP and a driver of demand (Lotz, 2007, p. 141). Programs like *Six Feet Under*, *Deadwood,* or *In Treatment* were distributed via cable, DVDs (Kompare, 2006), or streaming platforms. A supporting factor for the establishment of quality TV was its legitimization by critical discourse (Newman & Levine, 2012, p. 4). The resulting attributions were used for branding programs (Johnson, 2007, p. 20) and whole channels like HBO (cf. Feuer, 2007; Leverette et al., 2008; Rogers et al., 2002). As a consequence, these brands served as "class definers" and "primary currency of a system of distinction" (Rogers et al., 2002, p. 56).

TV IV

By now society has entered the next phase, the "third golden age of television" (Martin, 2013, p. 9). Premium cable channels like HBO, AMC, FX, and Showtime dominate the quality TV market with programs like *True Detective, Breaking Bad, The Americans,* and *Dexter*. Moreover, new players like the online platform Netflix have entered the competition with original serial programming (*House of Cards*, *Orange is the New Black, Sense8*) that is distributed via streaming only. Again, the balance of power is changing with media convergence allowing for even greater viewer agency: choice, control, convenience, customization, and community are, according to Lotz (2007, p. 245), the defining dimensions of

current television. Thus, television use has changed "from flow to files" (Mittell, 2010, p. 422). This kind of media use is independent from constraints of space, time, and program schedules: "from appointment television to engagement television" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 121). Episodes can be viewed repeatedly and/or *en bloc* (so-called binge-watching; Brunsdon, 2010). This prolonged and highly concentrated reception mode suits complex, multi-layered narratives extremely well (McCabe, 2005, p. 208). It is the audio-visual equivalent to a page-turner: Like a book that one has to read from cover to cover in one session, quality TV is hard to turn off. Binge-watching might alter the viewing experience as it fosters comprehension and transportation.

Contemporary Serial Television: Characteristics of Quality TV

This chapter is about quality TV. But what does that mean exactly? Originally, the term quality denoted a feature that an object possessed (from Latin *qualitas* as opposed to *quantitas*; Nowell-Smith, 1994, p. 37). In everyday language, though, quality usually refers to high value or excellence. Thus, it has both a descriptive and an evaluative meaning (Rosengren, Carlsson, & Tagerud, 1996, p. 5). Sometimes quality implies a normative judgment as well when the term is used to define what good television should be like (cf. Ishikawa, 1996). My aim is less ambitious. I want to describe commonalities of television shows that are designated quality TV series. To carve out and systematize their similarities (provided there are any) and peculiarities is necessary groundwork for theorizing how viewers might make sense of the texts and experience them. To do so I draw on quality as a complex and multi-faceted concept (Garvin, 1984, p. 39): Quality is individually and historically bound (Mazdon, 2005, p. 4) and discursively constructed by relevant stakeholders. This social consensus is based on determinable (if not objective) features of the text, personal tastes, and social attributes like norms, standards, or conventions. Thus, quality is a notion deeply interwoven in the texture of culture and its hierarchies (Corner, 1997). This is why quality discourses often have a naturalizing effect where formerly subjective judgments became facts and assessments were framed as legitimate hierarchies (Newman & Levine, 2012, p. 6). As Rupert Murdoch put it: "Most of what passes for quality on British television . . . is no more than a reflection of the values of the narrow elite which controls it and has always thought that its tastes are synonymous with quality" (Creeber, 2004, p. 69). These assertions have factual consequences, however, on both social and individual level (Sewell, 2010). To label a text as quality TV rises its symbolic value and builds reputation (Garvin, 1987, p. 107), it increases its demand (albeit not necessarily so; cf. Costera Meijer, 2005), and frames the viewing experience by way of a meta-genre. I will come back to this after I have laid out the characteristics of quality TV.

The technological, economic, legal, and social developments described above prepared the ground for high quality television series like *Breaking Bad, Downton Abbey, Game of Thrones, House of Cards, Mad Men,* and *True*

Detective—the 2014 Emmy Award winners in the category outstanding drama series. Based on a literature research, I will now systemize what makes these series outstanding. In so doing I will show that quality TV series are comparable to literary fiction. This proximity suggests the necessity to adapt our theoretical understanding of audiovisual entertainment media to these characteristics.

Scholars agree that quality TV is demanding on several levels (Akass & McCabe, 2008; C. Johnson, 2005; McCabe, 2005): It is innovative and complex both in terms of content and form. It challenges viewing habits and genre expectations by breaking taboos, violating television customs, and expanding narrative rules. Additionally, it has high production values and a distinct visual style. I understand the concept of quality TV as follows: Serial quality TV is complex in terms of storytelling, cast, narrative ambiguity, and intertextuality. Due to realistic execution, controversial subjects, and ambiguous characters quality series appear authentic. Moreover, they stand out because of a signature style composed of high production values, distinctive visual style, and techniques fostering reflexivity. Quality TV addresses a special, highly autonomous audience segment. As a meta-genre it supports selection, frames comprehension, and channels interpretation. Quality serial television offers a cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience with added symbolic value. The central aspects of the definition are now explained in more detail, the resulting entertainment experience is modeled thereafter.

Complexity

Narrative complexity is at the core of quality television (Mittell, 2015). It can be understood as a distinct storytelling mode. This mode merges techniques of the serial and the series building a complex flexi-narrative. Manifold parallel and interlaced storylines (as in *Hill Street Blues*), a huge cast (the "social network complexity" of *The Wire*; S. Johnson, 2005, p. 109), and last but not least the prolongation that enables continuous storytelling and character development (like the 331 episodes of *ER*) make for a good series. Moreover, like any popular culture, quality TV series are embedded in a reference structure: "Contemporary television increasingly 'overflows' from the primary text across multiple platforms . . . [constructing] an extended, immersive experience" (Brooker, 2001, p. 456; cf. Manovich, 2001). An example is the alternate reality game (ARG) *The Lost Experience*. This highly complex, interactive, transmedia hypertext was inspired by *Lost* and bridged the gap between the seasons of the show. With Fiske (1987) this phenomenon might be referred to as intertextuality (pp. 108–127) designating links both within the text and between the original text and surrounding works. Such ancillary content can be professional (like DVD extras, merchandise, comic books, ARGs, blogs, twitter accounts, websites, and the like) or user-generated (like fan art, wikis etc.; for examples see Barton, 2012; Gray, 2010; Lavery, 2007; Oernebring, 2007; Scott, 2013). Post-receptive social TV activities to connect with the community, producers, and characters and to evaluate the programs can be placed in this category as well (Buschow,

Schneider, & Ueberheide, 2014; Giglietto & Selva, 2014). These so-called *paratexts* add to the understanding of the characters (Kozloff, 1992, p. 92), the meaning of the original text, and its evaluation. Moreover, paratexts allow for user interaction, engagement, participation, and community building (Jenkins, 2008). They also grant credibility and aura (Gray, 2010, p. 82).

A by-product of narrative complexity is *ambiguity*: Quality series are ambiguous because the stories contain several blank spaces like cold opens (the chase at the very beginning of *Luther*), apparent contradictions, undisclosed motives, incomprehensible actions (like the medical dialogues in *ER*), and the like. In this they are comparable to literature. As a consequence, viewers need patience, the will, and the proficiency to fill in the blanks in order to construct meaning. The more blanks a text contains, the more elaboration (or reiteration) is necessary for decoding. This might be perceived as stimulating and entertaining or as arduous and boring. What is more, quality TV series often feature morally ambiguous characters (so-called "MACs"; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). Martin (2013) even calls the antihero trend "the signature for the decade's TV" (p. 267) because complex characters like John Luther (*Luther*), Jack Bauer (*24*), Walter White (*Breaking Bad*), or Carrie Mathison (*Homeland*) who superbly walk the thin line between good and evil are very common in contemporary serial television. Complexity and ambiguity lead to polysemy (Fiske, 1987) that renders the texts open to multiple, individually varying readings (Liebes & Katz, 1993, p. 140).

Authenticity

Despite their being fictional, contemporary TV series appear realistic in several ways: They are authentic in terms of subject matter (*Treme*, for instance, deals with the consequences of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans), content (the police procedural *Homicide: Life on the Street* is based on David Simon's observations as a police reporter in Baltimore), and style (like the resurrection of the 1960s in *Mad Men*). Authenticity is an important aspect as perceived realism is a moderator of media influence (Hall, 2003, p. 624) and is positively related to quality judgments (Greenberg & Busselle, 1996). Fictional authenticity contains several dimensions of realism that might enhance audience engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Hall (2003) identifies the following aspects of media reality: Factuality is comparable to the notion of the magic window (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000), like the display of Parkinson's disease symptoms in the *Michael J. Fox Show*. Narrative realism refers to the story's consistency. Plausibility, on the other hand, refers to credibility (how plausible is it, for instance, that the characters of *Friends* can afford the depicted lifestyle?). Typicality alludes to the question whether something is highly probable or not (like a chemistry teacher being able to cook top-notch methamphetamine). Even if all these dimensions are not met, the series can still be emotionally realistic (i.e., a teenager feeling different and excluded in *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*). All aspects are supported by perceptual persuasiveness, that is a compelling visual illusion (like twentieth century

England in the period drama *Downton Abbey*). Additionally, quality TV often deals with controversial issues (like the war on drugs or torture) and contains multi-layered and therefore more credible characters (like the gay, scarred, duster wearing stick-up man Omar Little from *The Wire*).

Signature Style

Visual distinctiveness (like the light in *Six Feet Under*; Akass & McCabe, 2008, p. 79), stylistic features, and high production values are almost as important for quality TV series as complexity and depth of characters and scripts (C. Johnson, 2005, p. 59). Both semantic planes (content and style) reinforce each other because "themes and style are intertwined in an expressive and impressive way" (Cardwell, 2007, p. 6). Stylistic integrity is a key component for the appeal of quality series (Bignell, 2007). It contains, for instance, innovative techniques like cinematographic photography (i.e., widescreen and point-of-view shots in *Breaking Bad*), simultaneous and achronological narration (the split screen technique of *24* or and the flashbacks/flash-forwards in *A Young Doctor's Notebook*, respectively), multi-perspective storytelling (Rashomon effect; see for instance S05.E12 'Bad Blood' of *The X-Files*), and breaking the fourth wall (i.e., by directly addressing the audience like Frank Underwood in *House of Cards*). Genre conventions are often violated or toyed with; for instance, by staging a medical drama as a musical, a sci-fi program as a documentary (Lavery, 2004), or by mixing conventional genres (like soap opera and mafia movie in *The Sopranos*; Creeber, 2004, pp. 100–112). By this, contemporary narratives constantly undermine viewers' expectations, call attention to them and challenge them. Self-referencing forms can even take precedence over storytelling (Butler, 2013; Poulaki, 2014, pp. 38–46). When style and structure are foregrounded moments of reflexivity are offered to the viewer achieving "a double metafictional and metanarrational effect" (Poulaki, 2014, p. 39). Some of these effects will presumably enhance narrative engagement while others are prone to diminish it. On the other hand, by focusing "on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness" (Mittell, 2006, p. 38–39) the dual-mode entertainment experience might be enriched.

Quality TV as Meta-Genre: Managing Expectations and Adding Value

Contemporary serial television is subtle, open, intellectually and emotionally challenging, and well done. Because of this, quality TV is hard to make sense of and sometimes hard to bear. One has to make an effort to successfully decode it. If this challenge is mastered, though, the experience is intellectually rewarding: "This kind of jigsaw puzzle or Lego set or computer game invites the metalinguistic viewer to anticipate the combinatorial possibilities and to stay with the program to prove himself [*sic*] right" (Liebes & Katz, 1993, p. 144). The feeling "that you made it" adds another layer to the entertainment experience:

> For those who have acquired the cultural competence needed to adopt an aesthetic disposition, it is possible to look differently upon a television series: to perceive the artistic vision of an individual creator where once one may have seen stories with no discernable author; to reflect on the meaning of form even as one feels drawn into the pleasure of a gradually unfolding narrative; to recognize the threads of cultural and historical references woven into the fabric of a story; to appreciate the subtle subversion of genre conventions and audience expectations; and, most importantly, to celebrate the transcendence of the artwork over everyday experience and more mundane forms of popular culture. Television series have provoked many responses over the years, but only recently have they invited cultural consecration as works of art.
>
> (Anderson, 2008, p. 25)

The complexity of quality TV content is mirrored by a multi-faceted entertainment experience. Its claim to artistic status, by an awareness of connoisseurship, adds value to this experience. Watching (even binge-watching) serial quality television is better than just watching "plain TV" because the quality designation carries cultural status (Newman & Levine, 2012, p. 32). This status is objectified (or even commodified; Kompare, 2006, p. 338) in the form of DVDs. They stand for "completeness" and "collectability" (Hills, 2007, p. 41), features that increase the value of the cultural object (Gray, 2010). Thus, quality TV comes with symbolic value. Its use and appreciation marks the self-proclaimed connoisseur—in his or her own view—as distinct from the "ordinary viewer." Quality TV consumption and follow-up communication (i.e., in blogs or forums) build symbolic capital if this action is acknowledged by relevant others (Bourdieu, 1985). If in former times TV was only suitable for distinction if one did *not* watch it, with the advent of quality TV this has changed: "In this manner, pay cable sells cultural capital to its subscribers, who are elevated above the riffraff that merely consume television" (Santo, 2008, p. 20; see also C. Johnson, 2007, p. 10).

Commonly, television genres are taxonomic categories with descriptive and organizing character. They are culturally constructed and historically bound (Feuer, 1992; Mittell, 2004). Genres reduce complexity and uncertainty by shaping expectations and viewing experiences. They classify and organize media experiences by linking them to concepts like cultural value and social function (Mittell, 2004, p. xii). Television genres are usually deduced from text traits and production standards. Quality TV series, however, "fit no discernible genre at all—except quality" (Martin, 2013, p. 271). Thus, quality TV can be seen as a meta-genre designating complex narratives, authenticity, signature style—and the surprising element that calls for a tolerant and flexible dual reception mode. The meta-genre quality TV is constructed discursively in a cultural context. Like a traditional genre it supports selection, frames comprehension, and channels interpretation. Moreover, it adds symbolic value to the viewing experience. It is important to note, however, that the classification

as quality TV does not necessarily imply an individual judgment of taste: While the meta-genre quality TV might be acknowledged, the series in question may still be dismissed (Cardwell, 2007).

Making Sense of Complex Narratives: Modeling the Entertainment Experience of Quality TV Series

Quality TV series are complex in terms of story and characters. Thus, they lend themselves to narrative engagement including both presence in the narrative world and emotional engagement with characters (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). On the other hand they are stylistically distinct, calling for a mode of reception that is aware of the form. The complexity of quality TV in terms of content and style as well as intertextuality impedes decoding. The innovative visual and narrative style adds a further layer of meaning to the text, enhancing elaboration costs once more by calling for formal awareness. This might impact on narrative understanding and presence. The polysemy renders the text open to manifold readings. Authenticity might be beneficial for narrative engagement by fostering realism and credibility. On the other hand going against conventional stereotypes and story schema might have the opposite effect. Finally, as the meta-genre discussion indicates cultural aspects have to be taken into account when modeling the experience of quality TV.

I now want to propose a model of the quality TV entertainment experience (QTV-EE; see Figure 4.1). The model was developed to cater to quality TV series and their peculiarities as discussed above. It aims at advancing our theoretical understanding of the comprehension and reception of complex serial narratives by using an interdisciplinary approach. It integrates findings on comprehension processes from literary studies, insights on media reception from psychology and communication studies, a sociological perspective (regarding the person's social position) and findings from the humanities (with regard to the influence of culture on individual readings). The model is a first step towards an empirical study of quality TV. The comprehensive conceptual design enables a systematic operationalization of the elements based on a consistent frame of reference.

The QTV-EE model depicts a specific form of dual-mode entertainment reception that results (at best) in a meta-emotional, multi-dimensional entertainment experience. The experience comprises both hedonic (enjoyment) and non-hedonic (appreciation, elevation) dimensions of pleasure. These aspects are complemented by an aesthetic experience. This suggests the necessity for a complex dual reception strategy, a "'both-and' mode of engagement" (Nelson, 2007, p. 124). Experiencing high quality flexi-narratives is cognitively and affectively challenging and has symbolic value.

Empirically, the model focuses on the microscopic level. Influences of meso (i.e., production contexts) and macro level (i.e., socio-cultural context) are implicitly included as they determine the social position of the individual (Bourdieu, 1985) and establish the structures in which quality TV (as a work of

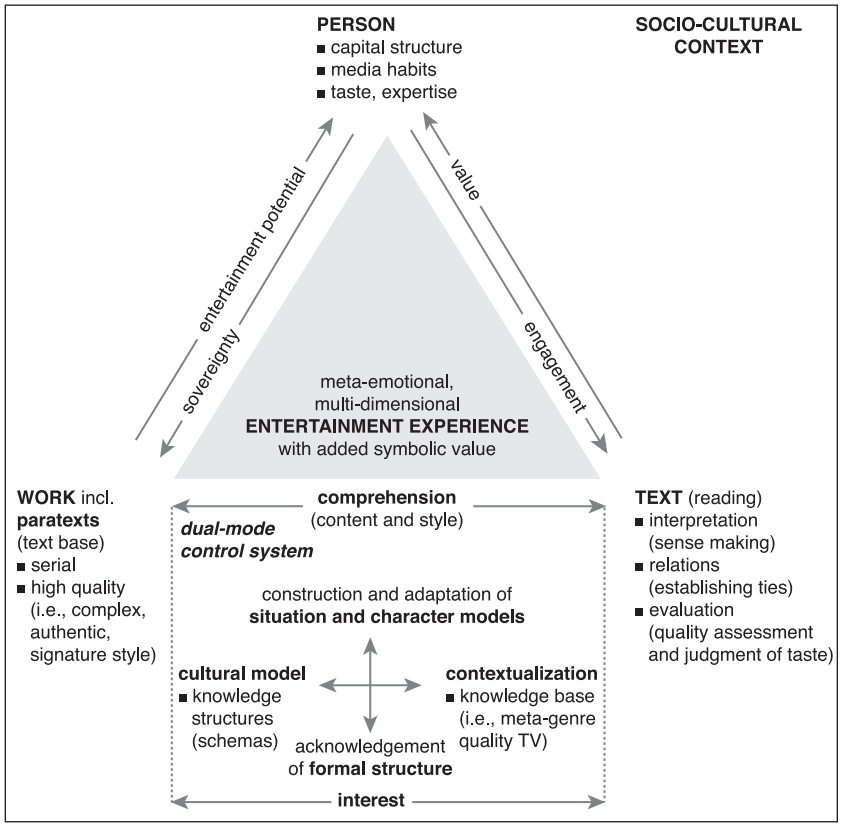

Figure 4.1 Model of the Quality TV Entertainment Experience (QTV-EE)

fiction, a meta-genre, and a reading) flourishes. The entertainment experience arises from an interaction of person and work realized as an individual reading (the text). The figure models the quality TV experience as an equilateral triangle denoting the equal importance of each of the three components: (a) the *person*, as a socially positioned and culturally shaped individual, (b) the structurally positioned and discursively constructed high quality *work* as defined above, and (c) the individual reading that is the valuable result of the interaction between, that is, the *text* (a) and (b). The cognitive and affective challenging entertainment experience with added value derives from a successful interplay between all three factors. The process of *comprehension* (as depicted below the hypotenuse of the triangle)—how the text earns personal relevance and value—is a crucial part of the model because this is where culture comes in. Cultural models contextualize the sense-making process by integrating knowledge about the world in general, and about narratives and stylistic techniques in particular. Depending on the complexity of the text, this construction might be strenuous and tedious. Thus focused, prolonged, and/or repeated viewing is

required for the full experience. This is especially the case because one cannot always draw on preexisting schemas during the process of sense making (see below). Instead, models have to be reconfigured continuously while watching quality TV series. Comprehension of complex series is not confined to narrative information, though. The element of style inserts another plane of meaning that has to be decoded. This calls for a dual reception mode shaped by a specific control system. The control system develops by repeated contact with specific types of texts. In the moment of exposure it is triggered by certain text features like quality markers (i.e., elements of signature style). The enhanced engagement necessary for understanding complex texts is made sure by *interest* in the subjects, the personae, and the unfolding of the story (referenced at the left leg of the triangle). The return on investment is the *value* of the realized text (see right leg); that is, the cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience with symbolic value. This value is intrinsic and, thus, self-reinforcing.

The person in the model is thought of as active, autonomous, and engaged (see right leg). The extent to which this is the case might vary and, consequently, mediate the entertainment experience. Personality traits are not part of this model. It is plausible, though, that characteristics, like the need for cognition, moderate the interaction (Green et al., 2008; Henning & Vorderer, 2001). The reading of the text includes an assessment that has a textual and a social dimension. A quality assessment draws on criteria intrinsic to the text while the judgment of taste is reached by balancing these criteria with individual expectations resulting in a personal valuation. High personal value should result in repeated exposure and/or enhanced demand (as a volitional behavioral outcome; cf. Nabi & Krcmar, 2004). I will now describe the elements of the QTV-EE model and their interplay in more detail.

Experiencing Quality TV

Entertainment as Meta-Emotion

Quality TV texts might instigate enjoyment, pleasure, enlightenment (Dyer, 2002; Vorderer, 2001; Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994). Serial entertainment as described above (flexi-narratives dealing with controversial subjects) might also trigger suspense (Knobloch, 2003; Vorderer, Wulff, & Friedrichsen, 1996), melancholy or sadness (sad-film paradox; Hofer & Wirth, 2012; Oliver, 1993b), horror, disgust, and fear (Cantor, 2006; Oliver, 1993a; Tamborini, 2003), or they might confront the viewer with extreme violence (Miron, 2003). That these rather distressing feelings are—on the whole—enjoyed or appreciated by the viewer is usually explained by the concept of meta-emotions (Bartsch, Vorderer, Mangold, & Viehoff, 2008; Oliver, 1993b, 2008; Vorderer & Hartmann, 2009). A positive meta-emotion is the outcome of a monitoring process in which emotions that arise during exposure are appraised and responded to. In other words, it is some kind of

retrograde emotional summation with an overall positive outcome. Nabi and Krcmar (2004) conceptualize this outcome as both affective and cognitive in nature. Considering its characteristics a combination of emotional experiences and cognitive challenges is probable for quality TV as well (Cardwell, 2007, p. 30; Cupchik, 2011; Latorre & Soto-Sanfiel, 2011; Tan, 1996, p. 229).

Multi-Dimensional Entertainment Experience

Watching quality TV series is not only a meta-emotional but also a multi-dimensional experience: Appreciation and elevation might supplement enjoyment as a result of a meaningful entertainment experience (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, 2011; Oliver & Hartmann, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Wirth, Hofer, & Schramm, 2012) and even elicit physiological reactions like goose bumps, a lump in the throat, or chills (Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012, pp. 362, 366). Meaningful experiences are more probable when the depiction is realistic (Hall & Bracken, 2011) and the characters are morally ambiguous (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012)—both features of quality TV. Such experiences are indirectly rewarding (Bartsch, 2012). Traditional narratives privilege narrative engagement over the realization of the artifact (Tan, 1994, p. 13; 1996, p. 78) because the latter diminishes emotional reactions (Tan 1996; Visch & Tan, 2008). In quality TV series, however, style also bears meaning that needs to be decoded (Cupchik & Kemp, 2000). Thus, it is important to take both viewing modes—immersed and formally aware—into consideration for the model as both form and content are sources of pleasure (Klimmt, 2011). The decoding of both planes of meaning needs a lot of effort but—as with other aesthetic artifacts—it is self-rewarding. Preconditions for the enjoyment of this kind of entertainment are increased attention, certain cognitive capabilities, and the willingness to use them for the decoding of an entertainment show. This is motivated by interest and the appreciation of the artistic work (Tan, 1996; 2008). Interest is understood as an inclination to allocate attention. It can be experienced individually as fascination, enthrallment, suspense, transportation, and so forth (Tan, 1996, p. 86). It is tied to personal concerns and certain expectations and it "is determined by the relationship between investment and return" (Tan, 1996, p. 100). Interest is the motor that powers the dual-mode entertainment experience.

Engagement with Serial Narratives

As a rule, "seriality [is] an invitation to viewer involvement" (Liebes & Katz, 1993, p. 144). Involvement is a measure of intensity of information processing, of the cognitive and affective *engagement* with the text and its characters (Wirth, 2006). In the model, engagement is indicated at the right leg of the triangle. Narrative engagement consists of narrative presence (i.e., the feeling of being transported into a text; Oatley, 2002) and emotional engagement with characters (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Perceived story authenticity is

a prerequisite for both types. Both external and narrative realism are important for this perception (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008, p. 267; Hall, 2003). Thus, quality TV series that are authentic in terms of content and characters should benefit from this. Narrative engagement is experienced as pleasurable (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009, p. 326). Artistry or "craftsmanship" (Green & Brock, 2002, pp. 317, 328) supports transportation, whereas the foregrounding of stylistic features might be detrimental to it. Engagement with characters is also crucial for narrative experiences—be that empathy, sympathy, identification (Cohen, 2006; Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2009; Tan, 1996), parasocial interaction (Giles, 2002), or interest (Tan, 1996). The reference point for any form of character relations is the persona. Serial narratives with their recurring ensemble and several chances for character development are especially prone to build relations (Pearson, 2007). Special textual cues (like voice-over or direct address) facilitate engagement with characters (Semmler, Loof, & Berke, 2015). Character relations foster suspense (Knobloch, 2003) and enjoyment in general (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Quality TV series and their connected paratexts also hold challenges for this concept, though, as transmedia storytelling allows for character development in several different outlets. The viewer-persona relation might be enriched by manifold additional pieces of information and background stories on the Internet but it might also be disturbed when the sources are inconsistent or conflicting.

Complex Texts and the Construction of Meaning

Sense making is the basis for the entertainment experience of quality TV series. The comprehension of both content and style thus forms the hypotenuse of the triangle in the model. Media texts have to be understood in order to be enjoyed and/or appreciated. Decoding is an active process, even more so with quality TV: "Quality television . . . is about a complete cultural viewing experience that imagines proactive consumers owning the text—selecting when they will watch it and engaging in the meaning-making process" (McCabe, 2005, p. 221). Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) modeled the moment of sense making as the interplay of narrative comprehension and engagement resulting in specific outcomes, one of them enjoyment (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011). Their model shows how recipients construct meaning from texts with the help of real-world knowledge and genre schemas. The smoother this sequence proceeds the more probable narrative engagement becomes and, as a consequence, enjoyment. Among other things, the success of the process is determined by the coherence and consistency of the text. Perceived realism renders engagement more likely (Ahn, Jin, & Ritterfeld, 2012; Hall & Bracken, 2011).

The interpretation process of quality TV commences by constructing culturally bound mental models guided by a text-specific control system. Modeling is based on both content and style information. The process is fueled by interest. It is rewarding in itself.

Dual-Mode Control System for Inconsiderate Texts

The process of sense making varies according to the kind of text that is processed (i.e., literary or informational). The control system guiding this process is a cognitive system that derives from repeated exposure to specific types of texts (Zwaan, 1996, pp. 241, 249) like complex narratives. It integrates knowledge with motivational and situational aspects and draws on relevant schemas (Zwaan, 1996). A control system for literary texts, for instance, might be activated by a specific surface structure (i.e., the meta-genre quality TV) or certain features of the text base (like flashbacks, flash-forwards, or unusual perspectives; Zwaan, 1996, p. 242). By this attention is drawn to the aesthetic characteristics of the text with possible detrimental effects for comprehension (Zwaan, 1996, pp. 246–247). Moreover, comprehension might be impeded by the text base itself because its sense is not immediately recognizable and the comprehension process has to be bottom-up (Zwaan, 1996, p. 247). Apparently, irrelevant details might become important during the course of the story. These details have to be kept in mind for further reference, thereby binding cognitive capacities. Open and complex narratives call for the construction of more than one situation model at a time or the postponement of its final design (see below). Only once enough information is gathered the final model can be constructed. Such "wrap-up moments" (Zwaan, 1996, p. 252) might be offered by repeated watching. Altogether, complex texts that are incoherent and ambiguous (so called "inconsiderate texts"; Zwaan, 1996, p. 247) make great demands on cognitive processing but they reward this demand directly by being interesting (Zwaan, 1996, p. 243) or indirectly by adding symbolic value to the experience.

Mental Models and Cultural Contextualization of Open Texts

Narrative comprehension—actively constructing meaning from a text—is based on a mental model (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008, pp. 257–260). During the construction process the story is realized as an individually varying reading based on the text base (Cohen, 2002). Starting point is the construction of a situation model including the initial situation, the spatial setting, the characters and their relations based on the background information given at the beginning of most stories (exposition; Graesser, Olde, & Klettke, 2002, p. 258). Original construction and continuous adjustment of the mental model are guided by schemas and stereotypes (i.e., genres). The less conventional a narrative is, the harder or more tedious the model building should be. Imagine the following case:

> So there's a girl. She's walking down an alley. It's dark, the music is ominous, and everything we know about pop culture tells us she's going to be monster food in about 30 seconds.
>
> (Sepinwall, 2013, p. 191)

Thus, the viewer constructs a situation model according to the horror film genre in which young girls usually do not survive. But:

> Only there's a guy [Joss Whedon, author of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*]. He's a third-generation screenwriter, an absolute sponge for pop culture, and he likes nothing more than using our own expectations about how these things work against us. What if, the guy wonders, the girl isn't the victim, but the hero? What if the monster needs to be afraid of *her*?
>
> (Sepinwall, 2013, p. 191; emphasis original)

That is what happens here: Buffy, the teenage girl, hunts monsters, not the other way around. Thus, the schemas are in need of adaptation (unless the viewer operated under the quality TV meta-genre in the first place and had been prepared for the unexpected).

One feature of quality TV as discussed above is its ambiguity due to the blank spaces in the text base. In order to understand viewers have to do a lot of filling in (S. Johnson, 2005, p. 83). Comprehension models that deal with entertaining works of literature or other aesthetic artifacts account for that. Zwaan (1996), for instance, starts from the text base as the raw material of meaning. With reference to real-world knowledge and other familiar text bases (like paratexts) a situation model is constructed as an "amalgamation of information obtained from the text and inferences constructed by the reader" (Zwaan, 1996, p. 244). Situation models are multi-dimensional (in terms of time, space, and causality), even if the story is not (Zwaan, Magliano, & Graesser, 1995). Blanks are filled in via repeated exposure (Zwaan et al., 1995, p. 395). Discontinuity (like flashbacks) can impede model construction leading to longer processing time (Zwaan et al., 1995, p. 387). Media expertise, on the other hand, supports understanding. Narrative knowledge and knowledge about cinematic presentation methods (like cuts, sound, camera setting, editing, etc.) are consulted to create meaning (Ohler, 1994, p. 152). In the case of contemporary television series this knowledge is available as the meta-genre quality TV.

Understanding and liking of popular culture is not possible without context. Cultural discourses, media expertise, and individual tastes contribute to the process of comprehension and enjoyment and/or appreciation. Schemas, scripts, and stereotypes are rooted in culture (Tan, 1996, pp. 71, 73). Nevertheless, most existing models do not account for this, at least not in so many words. I want to explicitly incorporate culture into the QTV-EE model by drawing on the concept of cultural models (Strasen, 2008, p. 265). The term denotes the implementation of cultural influences and discourses into the sense making process (Strasen, 2008, p. 274; see also Mittell, 2004). Cultural models connect culturally shaped experiences with the individual cognitive system. By this, culture as a symbolic system promotes contextualization and sense making and converts a bunch of meaningless audiovisual information bits into a high quality cultural artifact. For successful communication the cultural models of the discourse communities (i.e., showrunner and viewers) have to be compatible (Strasen, 2008, p. 273). This is interesting because although quality TV series more often than not originate from the USA they are extremely successful in other cultures as well (Schluetz & Schneider, 2014).

Among other things, quality TV series stand out due to their visual and narrative style. Mittel terms this "the narrative special effect" (2006, p. 35):

> These moments push the operational aesthetic to the foreground, calling attention to the constructed nature of the narration . . . this mode of formally aware viewing is highly encouraged by these programs, as their pleasures are embedded in a level of awareness that transcends the traditional focus on diegetic action typical of most viewers.
>
> (Mittel, 2006, pp. 35, 36)

To account for this effect it is necessary to include the decoding of stylistic aspects. To do so I draw on the model of aesthetic experience by Leder, Belke, Oeberst, and Augustin (2004). It shows the relevance of specific frames, control systems, and pre-existing knowledge (expertise) for understanding and appreciating art. The model distinguishes two ways of art reception leading to aesthetic pleasure and aesthetic judgment, respectively (Leder et al., 2004, p. 502).

Ambiguous Characters and Impression Formation

Morally ambiguous characters as described above complicate the construction of mental models because tried and tested schemas do not work on them. Sanders (2010) developed a model of character impression formation that accounts for this problem. The basic idea is that both category-based and attribute-based impression formation processes occur simultaneously and successively. They vary according to media content and individual factors moderated by inconsistency resolution. Sanders illustrates her model with reference to a quality TV series:

> An immediate impression of Tony Soprano can be that of a mobster. Viewers will thus check the fit of this label. Again, for many viewers this label will seem appropriate. . . . Yet viewers may also see him being a loving father, his frequent panic attacks, and his emotional reactions to murders he commits. These things seem discrepant with the idea or label of, mobster.' Based on this, a viewer may engage in inconsistency resolution. Viewers may use all of this information to come to an impression, . . . representing the first inconsistency resolution outcome. The second option is that viewers will integrate into the category of mobster, the idea that a mobster can be a doting father and be affected by the violence and death surrounding him. These characteristics become a part, either temporarily or permanently, of the label "mobster." Other viewers may disregard what he does for his family and the emotional toll his job has on him, simply viewing him as a mobster and using all of the associated affective information that goes with that label. Still others may disregard the label of "mobster," viewing this as just his occupation, while the other characteristics represent who he is as a character. Any of these options represents

> the final inconsistency resolution outcome, a disregard of either the label or the attributes.
>
> (Sanders, 2010, p. 160)

This process is much more extensive (both in terms of time and cognitive capacities) than usual schema-based impression formation (Raney, 2004), especially so because quality TV characters often develop during the course of the series.

Also relevant in the context of situation modeling and character impression formation are moral considerations (Zwaan, 1996, p. 245). Here cultural aspects are especially influential as values and norms are rooted deep in society and culture. Consequently, a large body of research has dealt with this (for an overview see Tamborini, 2013). Moral considerations have a direct bearing on enjoyment because they influence whether a viewer likes a character or not, roots for him or her or not and, consequently, enjoys the unfolding of the events (affective disposition theory; originally Zillmann & Cantor, 1976; for an overview see Raney, 2003, 2004). Thus, every story needs a likeable character to be enjoyable. Amazingly this recipe works for MACs as well (Schlütz, Schneider, & Zehrfeld, 2014) because the viewers find ways to like them (for instance by way of moral disengagement; Bandura, 2002). Quality TV series usually offer textual cues to facilitate this (Carroll, 2004; Pearson & Messenger-Davies, 2003). Morally complex characters might serve as points of moral orientation (Raney & Janicke, 2013): The viewer wishfully identifies with them, dissociates from, or looks down on them. Either way, engaging with these characters may have a reliving effect compensating for or satisfying needs that cannot be met in real life. Another possibility to explain enjoyment in the absence of likable characters is the notion of fascination (Smith, 2011, p. 82) denoting acute attention without moral engagement. Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) show empirically that MACs are less sympathized with but their stories are as engaging (and, as a consequence, enjoyable) as stories with good characters.

Conclusion: Reading Quality TV

The interaction of a person with a quality work brings into being an individual reading. The comprehension process as described above creates meaning and results in a specific interpretation of the text. At the same time it offers the chance to develop relationships with the personae and to assess the work in terms of quality and personal taste.

Interpretation

When dealing with ambiguous texts the viewer has to grapple with complex narrative structures and schemas. Over the course of time, he or she gets used to this. This is positive, as ambiguity tolerance is an important asset in dealing with the complexity of modern times (Krieger, 2010). Successful sense making calls for effort and expertise. Expertise, on the other hand, is built

by repeated exposure. Moreover, literary texts that deviate from well-known schemas enhance processing expenses and call for more flexible and adjustable schemas. This is why such texts have the potential to renew schemas and mental models (Strasen, 2008, p. 252). For instance, repeated confrontation with MACs might enrich or reconfigure schemas (Raney, 2004; Shafer & Raney, 2012): "Over time, then, we learn to view antihero narratives through this lens, using a particular story schema that encourages moral disengagement" (Raney & Janicke, 2013, p. 160). This might not be altogether positive if this has implications for real-world behavior (like dimming the moral code; Raney, 2011, p. 22). Whether the effects from quality TV are beneficial or alarming (or both) is an empirical question worth addressing in the future.

Relations

Fictional media content is well suited for narrative persuasion (Green, Strange, & Brock, 2002; Shrum, 2004). Learning is often mediated or stimulated by social relations to media characters (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006; Papa et al., 2000; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005; Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Comello, & Ewoldsen, 2014). The simulation of social experience is one function of complex, emotionally realistic fiction (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Complex narrative texts teach the viewer how the world and human relations work. Ambiguous stories provide the possibility to take alternative perspectives and to reflect on ourselves:

> By taking note of the pro-attitudes Tony [Soprano] elicits from us we may come to appreciate how subtly our moral compass can be demagnetized. Thus, by inciting us to care for Soprano, David Chase makes vivid our realization of the moral threat of rationalization.
>
> (Carroll, 2004, p. 136)

Evaluation

Quality TV is—at least according to the presented model—challenging and strenuous, both intellectually and emotionally, at times even aesthetically. It does not offer "instant gratification" (Martin, 2013, p. 15). It is worthwhile, however, because watching quality TV provides gratifications that light entertainment cannot offer. This is comparable to reading literary texts which is more costly than dealing with popular fiction as well (Zwaan, 1996). The more cognitive capacities a viewer is able or willing to invest, the more expertise she or he has acquired, the easier becomes the decoding of the text. By watching, understanding, and talking about quality TV one can show off this expertise, one's connoisseurship.

This chapter dealt with contemporary television, complex television series, so-called quality TV. The discussion showed that this kind of entertainment content is comparable to artistic artifacts in terms of structure and the

surrounding quality discourse. I argued that the meta-genre, quality TV, serves as a heuristic for selection and reception and frames entertainment experiences and their assessment. In this manner quality entertainment offers a special, culturally bound experience that is intellectually challenging and at the same time rewarding—rewarding in the sense that it offers both direct effects and indirect outcomes (Bartsch, 2012). The direct impact is a positive meta-emotional and multi-dimensional entertainment experience. Indirectly, quality TV provides symbolic value and, thus, offers a profit of distinction (Bourdieu, 1985). As a consequence, the time spent with these series may not be perceived as wasted. Watching quality TV is not a "guilty pleasure" (Oliver & Raney, 2014; Reinecke, Hartmann, & Eden, 2014). Rather, it is comparable to curling up with a good book—a pastime that is rarely frowned upon. On the contrary, it is said that reading can make you a better person. And indeed reading literary fiction is supposed to add to your well-being and your cognitive capabilities (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001; Rieger, Reinecke, Frischlich, & Bente, 2014). There is also evidence that being transported into a story fosters real life empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013) and that reading literary fiction improves the understanding of other people's state of mind which in turn improves social interaction (Kidd & Castano, 2013). The same might hold true for complex contemporary television. Empirical studies show that serial television impacts on values in the long run (Eden et al., 2014; Weber, Tamborini, Lee, & Stipp, 2008) but many other research questions are still open for theoretical and empirical investigation. Communication studies should turn to them.

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