

### *It's not television.*

Graduate Conference on Contemporary US-American and British TV-Series  
Frankfurt am Main, February 22 – 23, 2013

Ever since the TV screen conquered the family space, it fulfilled an ambiguous and ever-changing role as pacemaker, entertainer, parent, and connector within and among cultural spheres. At the living room's center it is the dominant device for civil information but also dissipation. The means of continual storytelling via serials led to a new kind of "seasoning" that spawned intricate and dense narratological entities which correspond, expand, or combust traditional genre limits – constantly under the premise of economic demands, expectations, and finesse.

Critical inquiries into contemporary TV-series should therefore explore recent forms of cultural consumption as well as cultural criticism. The latter seems particularly appropriate given the fact that American TV-series have come to be regarded as a form of social commentary. Heralded by the advent of HBO's "quality" television, this trend was spearheaded by *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), *Deadwood* (2004-2006), and others. More recently, AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008) and *Mad Men* (2007) have earned praise for their depiction of a troubled American middle-class and, in the case of *Mad Men*, the historically accurate portrayal of "misogyny, homophobia, anti-Semitism, racism, and class-prejudice" (Butler). *The Wire* (2002-2008) has been described as social realism, thus spearheading the trend towards social commentary and enjoying a lasting success with (DVD) audiences and academics.

Yet what are the limits of social commentary when confronted with the demands of cable entertainment and viewer ratings? And, most importantly, if we wish to critically engage with the social commentary that such shows afford us, whether intentionally or unintentionally, which methods and approaches lend themselves? In addition, phenomena like online spin-offs, 'webisodes' and diversified mechanics of viewer loyalty combust traditional concepts of storytelling and deserve scholarly attention.

"It's not television" thus signifies both upon the claim to social commentary as well as upon the transformation of cultural practices that TV-series have brought about in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Topics might include but are not limited to:

- Common themes in audiovisual story-telling regarding viewer's expectations and preferences in contrast to or according with artistic endeavors and ambitions as well as economic constraints.
- Interfaces, synergies and incongruities between television and cinema as they target similar or divergent audiences; viewing as group experience, TV series as transatlantic cultural 'ambassadors'.
- Television's reactions to the hypertextual capacities of the internet, and the implications of strategies undermining the self-imposed limits of broadcast syndication and copyright; technological changes, means, and methods such as the Nielsen ratings, "quality" television, and Pay-TV/Pay-per-view.
- Discourses of "high" and "low" regarding mass culture and its (re-)cycling of taped contents, also in regard to spin-offs and merchandising.
- TV series in the context of modernist, postmodernist, materialist, and literary and/or cinematic aesthetic approaches.
- Questions of authenticity and liability in scripted TV drama and the rhetorical weight of its alleged social commentary: is controversial content necessarily realistic content? The renaissance of period style dramas (*Boardwalk Empire*, *Mad Men*, etc.).
- To what extent do the shows invest in what they criticize, whether it is the "patriarchal subculture" (Nußbaum), a topic that is shared by diverse shows such as *Game of Thrones* or *Downton Abbey*, or the topic of nostalgia, presumably exemplified by *The Tudors*, *Boardwalk Empire*, and *Mad Men*? How do *Downton Abbey* and *1900 House* reimagine the legacies of Empire?

We encourage submissions from junior scholars and graduate students. Please send your proposal (250 words, in English, deadline of submission: November 15, 2012) and a short CV to:

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