

'It Has Happened Before, It Will Happen Again': The Third Golden Age of Television Fiction

The conference titled 'It Has Happened Before, It Will Happen Again: The Third Golden Age of Television Fiction' was a media and television studies event held in the fall of 2008. Designed to be relatively narrow in focus, the conference assembled media scholars whose major object of study is television series. Twenty four researchers from four continents (participants came from Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, Spain, Israel, New Zealand, and the Czech Republic) delivered twenty presentations between 8 and 10 October 2008. The conference was organised by The Independent Scholars, a small-scaled corporation based in Istanbul (chaired by the Turkish film studies scholar Tuna Erdem), which, though unaffiliated with any university, operates at a level fully satisfies established expectations and standards.

The 'quality television' concept became a keyword of the conference. Robert J. Thompson defined 'quality television' in 1996 and framed it with an influential set of characteristics. The attributes of 'quality television' help us to distinguish anti-filmic, anti-realistic, cliché shows with bad scripts from the 'new' quality television that began to emerge in the 1980s and was based on the use of elements of drama, constant innovation, the introduction of socially marginal issues to the plots (e.g. gender inequality in *The Sopranos*), and thoughtful scripts. Thompson suggests that 'quality television' has a quality pedigree; it has to eke out a place for itself when confronted with wary networks and unappreciative audiences; it has a memory, mixes old and new genres, tends to be literary and writer-based, is self-conscious, deals with controversial subject matter, and has a tendency towards realism. According to Thomson, the beginning and end of the second golden age of television were marked in the US

by the airing of the police drama *The Hill Street Blues* in 1981 and the cancellation of *Twin Peaks* in 1991. We should not be surprised by the use of evaluative discourse to explicitly discriminate between quality and non-quality productions, and there are several reasons why. First, the concept was developed as (in a way) a self-regulatory instrument. In this context it protected the medium of television from overwhelming moralistic condemnation by ensuring that at least some parts of its programming contain quality shows. Second, the concept of 'quality television' makes more accurate sense when applied to the American television culture (networks and cable) for which it was designed, and which has more extreme poles of 'good' and 'bad' taste than the European tradition.

At the conference, many contemporary television series were compared with Thompson's original set of 'quality television' characteristics; others were analysed with a focus on the dynamics in the field. On the whole, reflections on recent television series produced in the past decade were manifestly triumphant, and it was acknowledged that viewers and producers have now entered 'the third golden age of television'. Since the 1990s and into the 2000s quality productions have ceased to be the exception and are now a standard and commonplace television style. Scholars in television studies in fact agree that since the beginning of the 1990s television has been nothing but a delicious banquet of quality shows. Scholars throughout the field of textual analysis of television studies take it for granted that in the realm of serial narratives American and BBC productions should be treated as global trend-setters and as the vanguard, so that almost the full attention of the conference was devoted to innovative flows in American and British products and the practices involved in making television series.

Using innovative, imaginative strategies and addressing socially appealing is-

sues in television series – ‘the new social and media mores’, as Derek Johnston put it in his paper ‘Life on Mars: Negotiating the Quality Generation Gap’ – were the main motifs uncovered in new ‘quality’ television serial dramas. As for sensitive social issues being newly incorporated into television series, John Benson, for instance, referred to the psychoanalytic, father-figure associative meanings in *House, MD* in his ‘Dark Shadows in the Background: Fleeting Discourses of Fatherhood in House, MD’. Going back to Foucault’s concept of ‘the care of the self’, Benson suggested that *House MD* has in fact much to do with a renewed definition of masculinity. Tuna Erdem and Seda Ergul concentrated on progressive representations of gender in *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* and *Nip/Tuck*. The researchers observed that – if judged from the perspective of these two shows – characters with a fixed and ‘neat’ heterosexuality are a thing of the past, because transgender reciprocity is not an uncommon point in the identity negotiations of new characters. Moreover, some digital television tools – morphing, for example – are very well suited for representing continuity, fluidity, and the implosive destruction of ‘classic’ binary oppositions.

Innovations and imaginative approaches were spotted in the production of sitcoms, on which the scholars from Spain proved to be experts. Patricia Diego and Mar Grandío analysed how *Friends* fandom influenced productions of domestic Spanish comedies, from *Más que amigos* or *Siete vidas* to the first Spanish spin-off named *Aída*. Mar Grandío and Joseba Bonaut reviewed the quality standards of new American and British television comedies in general and noted mainly the mixture of fiction and reality, the influence of cinema, the documentary style, the eccentric protagonists, and the use of absurdist humour.

Some presentations at the conference retreated from the predominantly herme-

neutical textual analysis into more sociological regimes of knowledge on television series. Amir Hetsroni – drawing on some older concepts of the ‘cultivation process’ in television – compared how death and sickness is presented in medical shows (*ER, Chicago Hope*) with the rates (mortality, age, and cause of illness) in real hospitals. The figures – as is typical in this type of research – showed how significantly medical show representations diverge from medical reality; according to Hetsroni, patients in *ER* and *Chicago Hope* are younger and more likely to pass away during hospitalisation. Aristotelis Nikolaidis described how the 24 television series became subsumed in the post-9/11 discourse through its links to the issue of terrorism and mainly through its evocation of espionage by using candid camera as the substance of its visual form. Of course, in the era of ideologically toned rhetoric about sacrificing individual rights for better collective security, when the ‘spying eye’ becomes established as the given perspective it articulates altogether new social meanings. In the more sociological ‘bloc’ of conference participants, Irena Reifová presented a paper on post-socialist television nostalgia in the Czech Republic, which Czech viewers encounter as frequent re-runs of television series produced in the era of communist television.

For more than thirty years a growing number of scholars have been acknowledging popular television fiction as a fully-fledged part of the repertoire of television and media culture studies. In this context, a conference devoted solely to the theory and research of contemporary television series would appear to be a natural event, because diverse aspects of the television series have become a well established part of academic enquiry into popular television content.

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