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"Can the Audience Want?" On the Artistic Status of Contemporary TV-Series

Angela Keppler

Abstract

This paper takes up a question that Theodor W. Adorno posed in 1963 relating to television. The aim is to situate the new TV series, which are part of so-called Quality TV, against the backdrop of the tradition, and to analyze the forms in which the medium is being used. An inspection of pertinent sequences leads to the conclusion that the enjoyment we experience when watching these series stems from the very type of active-passive involvement that Adorno described as being essential only for objects of high culture.

Key Words

active-passivity, Adorno, aesthetic experience, quality TV

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s and especially after the turn of the millennium, television critics and media researchers have discussed the supposed or actual transformation of American television. Contrary to its previously poor reputation (Reality TV), this phenomenon has been categorized as "Quality TV." It is said that a new era of television has dawned in which new formats have been developed, or further developed, that match even the best of what other artistic genres have to offer, particularly in literature and film. In 1996, Robert J. Thompson spoke of a "second golden age" of television that began as early as the 1980s, and we often hear talk of a "post-television era."^[1] These new shows not only display a much greater narrative arc, making them comparable to novels, but also indicate a transformation of already established television genres, or at least an adaptation to genres found in other media.^[2] An additional peculiarity of these new shows is seen to lie in the fact that they deal with issues of universal relevance.^[3] *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), for instance, revolved around the irresolvable conflict between family and clan. *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) portrayed the conflict between individuals and institutions in the allegorical cosmos of the big city. *In Treatment* (HBO, 2007-2010) dramatized the fragile relation between human closeness and distance in the world of psychotherapy. *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015) took a look back at the 1960s and a business world characterized by sexism and machismo, confronting the audience with the question of whether and to what extent these patterns have been overcome. *Homeland* (Fox 21, since 2010) introduces us to the atmosphere of permanent suspicion infecting everyday life in the United States during the "war on terror." *House of Cards* (Netflix, since 2013), and also *Scandal* (ABC, since 2012), offer sinister peeks at the political intrigue at the highest levels of the American political system. Critics and commentators have repeatedly remarked that such productions have even made television superior to cinema: "The 'everyday incidents' that are the stuff of more straightforward, non-quality soap operas and sitcoms are here transformed by a

suggestion that they may be read symbolically, reflexively or obliquely in order that broader truths about life or society might be found.”[4]

The academic attention currently paid to quality TV implies that both the production and the reception of television shows have significantly changed over the previous two decades. Owing to the use of digital video recorders, the internet as a platform for the legal and illegal downloading of television shows, and the increasing sale of DVD box sets, there is greatly expanded availability of these shows outside of the schedules set up by the major television networks. Just as cinema now represents merely one location among others for viewing films, television is no longer the sole, or even the main, location for quality television. These new forms of appropriating cinematic narratives also have an effect on the way they are presented, and vice versa. So-called quality TV, therefore, is no longer merely a matter of quality TV. Yet it remains an appropriate moniker for, after all, television is precisely what has given these shows their new look, provided, of course, critics’ praise and the confirmation of that praise by the academic community are, in fact, appropriate.

2. Guidelines

In this paper, I will discuss the artistic capacity and skill of this TV format focusing on the particular form of communication ingrained in its products. I will not deal with the factual *appropriation* of quality TV by various audiences but rather with the *guidelines* for appropriation these shows provide via their specific mode of presentation. Therefore my aim is the *potential* reception inherent in these aesthetic procedures.

When it comes to defining these techniques, we should not let ourselves be guided by one-sided observations. What makes quality TV special is not merely its (often not particularly) multi-dimensional narratives, which can also be found in more “classic” shows, such as *West Wing* or *Desperate Housewives*. Nor does it consist in the conspicuous presence of dubious or criminal protagonists, which is also characteristic of film noir.[5] Neither can we reduce this particularity to the fact that these shows present general existential, moral, and political problems through the use of multidimensional characters and social relationships. Narrative complexity, ethical ambivalence, and thematic layering are certainly crucial and prominent characteristics of many of these series, but their true particularity does not emerge until we link these characteristics to a new type of serial narrative. The latter is made especially apparent by the open form of these shows’ episodic character, which allows significant variations, digressions, and upheavals in their plot lines, in turn enabling them to transform their initially basic scheme. These techniques are what enables the creation of characters and conflicts that can significantly change over the progression of individual episodes. Because of how their respective narratives are composed, they break up the enclosed nature of individual episodes, thus giving them an epic quality, and not only enabling but even requiring viewers to be attentive to the overall rhythm of the shows’ seasons, and also to endings that are open, even to the producers.

If this is true or to the extent that this is true, the demands that quality TV makes on viewers differ from those made by conventional television. The aesthetic construction, and thus the

aesthetic experience that it allows, demands a particular form of active participation on the part of the viewers. It demands an increased willingness to go along with the show, which the viewers must accept if they wish to be entertained. They thus prefigure a stance that, according to traditional prejudices, might be found at the summit of the arts but not in the lowly world of television.

3. High demands

These demands make it worthwhile to pose again the question answered by Theodor W. Adorno in 1963, in the article of the same name, "Can the Audience Want?"^[6] Here Adorno addresses the problem of whether television promotes or prevents the maturity of the viewers. This is a problem that, ever since Plato's critique of writing, arises whenever a relatively new medium of communication arises. And as in his earlier works on television, Adorno's answer is negative.^[7] Given the conditions of culture-industrial production, the TV audience can only want what is "forced upon it anyway," that is all they can expect of media and its offer.^[8] According to Adorno, television, being one of the primary agencies of the culture industry, always creates an immature audience by subjecting it to the inescapable imperative of entertainment, thus exposing it to the ideological celebration of what exists. Even in Adorno's time, however, such a generalized diagnosis was hardly plausible, and it is even less so now, given the completely transformed conditions of the current media landscape.^[9] Even when it comes to conventional television, we can hardly argue that the audience uncritically adopts its contents. And this is even less true of quality TV. As much as the latter is produced by commercial providers, and is thus made in the interest of turning a profit, and as much as it aims to keep the audience in line, it also demands an audience that is as aware as it is critical, for it is only under these conditions that the audience can feel it is being entertained.

Whether and, if yes, how television audiences "can want" is, therefore, a tricky question. The fact that certain types of shows prefigure attitudes not only towards their content but also about their dramaturgy means that the reactions of the viewers cannot be entirely free. As long as they remain viewers, they are exposed to the flow of the show, as detached as they might be toward the attitude of the show. This demand becomes significantly more intense once we turn to shows that are entirely uninteresting, if we are not willing to let ourselves be captivated by their form and thus to be restricted in our wishes and desires. It is certainly true of quality TV, as this is what constitutes these shows' particular aesthetic claim, and which many of them also manage to fulfill. When it comes to quality TV, therefore, the only appropriate answer to Adorno's question is: yes and no. The audience can only want by willingly abstaining from wanting. Letting oneself be moved by an artistic object has always been a requirement of the productive reception of art. In the face of artistic objects, the audience can only follow its *own* will [*Eigensinn*] by recognizing that of the *object*, in our case by allowing itself to be moved by a complex, serial logic and thereby gaining an altered perspective on diverse existential and social phenomena. The economic success of quality TV, therefore, is also an indicator of the fact that such viewers and groups of viewers do indeed exist outside of the narrow confines of so-called "high culture."

4. Active passivity

In order to get a better understanding of this phenomenon, we should take a second look at Adorno's brief contribution. Contrary to the manipulative nature of popular culture and its merely "consumerist" reception, he points out the conditions for a much more demanding form of artistic production and reception. He writes that independent aesthetic experience and independent aesthetic judgment presuppose subjects "who give themselves over to the laws and the coherence of these creations, without prejudices and reservations. Yet nothing less is demanded of those who are responsible for artistic television productions."[\[10\]](#) The conspicuous parallel Adorno thereby draws between television and other art forms makes apparent that even Adorno felt it was possible for television to be as subversive as other art forms.

In his lectures on aesthetics during the winter semester of 1958/59, Adorno dealt in more detail with the particular dynamic of aesthetic experience. He told his students, whom he presumed to have an all too relaxed attitude toward the "enjoyment" of artistic objects, that it is not so important "what a work of art 'gives' to us, rather what we give the work of art; that is, whether one gives to the work of art, in a certain kind of active passivity or in a strained form of giving-oneself, that which this work expects on its part."[\[11\]](#)

Although the term 'strained' indicates a significant ethical-aesthetic rigor and, once again, Adorno's ignorance and fear of popular culture, he does accurately describe a basic structure of aesthetic experience. "Active passivity" here means that the audience must be willing to let itself be determined by the form of the product, the TV show, in our case, and this willingness is called forth by the works themselves. Adorno wrote, "Only by swimming along, so to say, with the various moments of the work of art to which you give yourselves and whose discipline you follow; only by reflecting and contrasting its various moments, recalling the past ones and expecting the future ones only to this extent will you arrive at a genuine understanding of the artistic object."[\[12\]](#)

This can be understood as a repeated explanation of the "active passivity" of experiencing art: that only those who go along can reflect; and only those who reflect can go along. Only then does Adorno, at least when he stands in front of his students, permit something like a stance of enjoyment: "If there is indeed such a thing as pleasure in the aesthetic or aesthetic enjoyment, then this enjoyment lies in what the work of art, if I may say it this way, achieves in us by absorbing us, by our entering into it and following it."[\[13\]](#) Adorno thus describes aesthetic experience essentially as a "going-along-with" the formal organization of artistic objects. This is also and especially what is required by quality TV. Only those who go along and let themselves be moved by both the dramaturgy and the contents of these shows can be entertained by them. After all, in the world of art, attentiveness, concentration, and reflection are not opposed to entertainment, animation, and aesthetic pleasure. Contrary to Adorno's prejudice, they instead represent the condition of aesthetic pleasure in more complex forms of artistic production. The structure of aesthetic experience analyzed by Adorno without concern for popular culture describes a significant way of reacting

to quality TV and other products of popular culture. But if this is true, the one-sided views of the artistic potential, and thus of the complex perceivability, of these products must be corrected, for these views only distort our perspective on crucial elements of popular culture.

5. A false alternative

Two forms of audience participation afforded by quality TV must be distinguished: an overly "passive" and an overly "active" model. We could also call this an opposition between a theory of manipulation and a theory of sovereignty. Together they represent a false alternative when it comes to the analysis of the role of the audience. The theory of a kind of manipulation of the audience with hardly any exceptions, which Adorno proposed with regard to the products of the "culture industry," does justice neither to the freedom to shape the products of television nor to the potential for receiving them. No less misleading, however, is an overly activist interpretation of the creative processes of reception that are, in the best cases, merely initiated by the products of television. According to the latter position, an independent or critical appropriation of aesthetic objects consists primarily in employing these objects at will, giving them an arbitrary interpretation, reading them "against the grain" or using them as mere material for individual "bricolage."

This position also fails to capture the particular drive of aesthetic objects and, thus, what they *allow* their recipients to experience and recognize. We call this a theory of "sovereignty" because, contrary to the theory of manipulation, it ascribes to the audience a far-reaching ability to control these products. Whereas the theory of manipulation localizes nearly all power in the product, the theory of sovereignty ascribes nearly all power to the recipients. Both positions, however, are equally inappropriate. For the aesthetic form of the products is always based on inescapable guidelines that necessarily restrict the possibilities of their reception. These guidelines lie in the dramaturgy of these shows and are therefore an objective part of them.

Therefore, to the extent that these products are successful, they produce their audience. This is what Adorno had in mind when he wrote that "intellectual products have an objective quality, an objective truth content."^[14] At this point, of course, we could bracket the overly pompous talk of a "truth content" and content ourselves with the claim that the thrill of quality TV lies in its audio-visual perspectives. Every specific interpretation, which always takes place in a particular context, remains an appropriation of these products. It is related to the aesthetic dramaturgy of these shows, especially when parts of the audience come up with thoroughly peculiar interpretations. One of the achievements of quality TV consists in fostering the peculiarity of their individual or collective appropriation by demanding special attention to the situations, characters, and narrative complications they present. The recipients are animated to both passively *and* actively relate to the twists and turns of the shows.

According to Adorno, a concentrated, at once reflective and interpretative attitude of "going-along-with" artistic processes presupposes that we give up our preconceived expectations and, thus, restrain our own will. If this kind of reception is appropriate

to quality TV, then the latter proves to be a *positive case* of “not-being-able-to-want,” whose *negative* aspects Adorno illuminates in his writings on the culture industry, unlike his writings on the theory of art. The claim that the culture industry, and thus television, produces an uncritical audience would thereby be proven to be not generally valid. For these medial forms create a (relatively) uncritical *and* a (relatively) critical audience. Because of the diversity of its formats and programs, television does not stand on one or the other of these sides but on both at the same time.

6. Three sequences

Quality TV doubtlessly belongs to television’s most aesthetically innovative creations. I would like to show why that is so with reference to three short, corresponding segments. Each example gives a different account of the same type of situation, a therapy session.^[15] Yet each of these sequences occupies a completely distinct position within the cosmos of the respective show.

6.1. *The Sopranos*

Mafia boss visits therapist. This, of course, is how the very first episode of *The Sopranos* begins. During his first therapy session, Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) explains to Dr. Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco) that, given his profession, he cannot afford to be visiting a therapist. During their second session, after Tony’s second breakdown, the therapist makes clear that although she is sworn to confidentiality about his psychological problems, she must pass on any information on criminal acts to the police. Therefore, both are aware from the very start that they cannot speak about all the things that are potentially disturbing the Mafioso. Tony’s third session takes place shortly before the end of the first episode.^[16] After images of an explosion from an attack Tony has ordered on a restaurant, there is an abrupt cut. We see Tony again in Dr. Melfi’s office, which is tastefully decorated with books and paintings. Tony and Dr. Melfi sit in chairs across from each other in front of a desk, between them a small coffee table. Tony, elegantly dressed, casually explains to his therapist that he feels fine, and that he is uncertain whether he needs any further treatment.



Fig. 1: *The Sopranos*, Season 01/Episode 01, 0:50:47.

The therapist explains to him that this cannot be due to the medication she prescribed for him during the previous visit. Tony

then asks for the real reason. The therapist answers, "Coming here. Talking. Hope comes in many forms." "But who's got time for that?" Tony spontaneously replies. Dr. Melfi asks what Tony is trying to tell her. Tony hesitates and then tells her about an absurd dream of his in which a bird flew away with his penis. What kind of bird, Dr. Melfi wants to know. A seagull or something. "What about ducks?" Dr. Melfi suggests, knowing that the trigger of Tony's first breakdown was the departure of a family of wild ducks that had raised their young in his swimming pool. Tony freezes, becomes sentimental and tells, with tears in his eyes, how much those ducks had touched him. "Oh Jesus fuck, now he's gonna cry," Tony comments on his own reaction.



Fig. 2: *The Sopranos*, Season 01/Episode 01, 0:53:31.

Up to this point, the dialogue develops in calm back-and-forth of camera shots. But the moment Tony views himself from a distance and curses himself, the camera also moves back, showing the doctor and her patient from the side. Dr. Melfi leans forward and moves a box of tissues on the table between them in Tony's direction, an offer Tony quickly accepts, a reserved gesture of rapprochement suggesting that the two will be dealing with each other for a longer period. As the dialogue continues, the camera moves the two protagonists ever closer together. Once again using the back-and-forth technique, the camera now looks at the face of the doctor from over Tony's shoulder and vice versa. The two thus begin to form a unit, also demonstrated by the cooperative manner in which their conversation proceeds. Dr. Melfi gives Tony a psychoanalytic suggestion that Tony willingly accepts: Once the ducks had their young, they became a family, which Tony picks up on in order to arrive at the interpretation that his own fear of losing his own family is what is constantly disturbing him. The first episode later ends with the camera panning across the empty pool in Tony's backyard.



Fig. 3: *The Sopranos*, Season 01/Episode 01, 0:54:14.

This scene also reveals the false bottom not only of the dialogue between Tony and his therapist but also of the series as a whole. For family has two meanings here: the biological family and the criminal association of the Mafia, including the irresolvable tension between the two. In this dual meaning of the word 'family' lies the reason for Tony's existential fears, which cannot, however, be made explicit to his therapist. If Tony wants to survive, he must conceal from his therapist and from himself the conflict between the two *foci* of his life. He thus also remains partially opaque to the viewers, not only in the many therapy sessions that follow. It is no accident that the dialogue ends with an indirect reference to the viewers' expectations: "What are you so afraid is going to happen?" Dr. Melfi asks. "I don't know," Tony answers. And like Tony, the viewers (and even the producers of the show) do not know at the beginning of the series what is going to happen to them, to the main character, and to all those with whom he is associated. This fear promises significant pleasure for the viewers, who get to follow the many attempts to deal with these events on the part of the series' protagonists. In this sense, Tony's initial question about who has the time for something like that has a concealed second meaning. We, the viewers, are the ones that will have all the time in the world in front of the TV screen.

6.2. *Mad Men*

The series *Mad Men* takes place in the self-obsessed and male-dominated world of advertising, situated primarily on New York's Madison Avenue, the same scenery from which Roger O. Thornhill (Cary Grant) is torn out of at the beginning of Alfred Hitchcock's famous film *North by Northwest* (USA 1959). The series presents the 1960s, however, from a radically historicizing perspective. Even its subheading offers an ironic, detached, and somewhat caricatured perspective on the *zeitgeist* of the years in which the economy was booming and men had all the say: "Enjoy the best America has to offer!" The main character Don Draper (Jon Hamm) is, until the third season, married to Betty (January Jones). Betty feels increasingly lost in the golden cage, represented by her roles as housewife, spouse of a notoriously unfaithful husband, and mother of their two children. Her husband thus suggests she see a therapist.

Her first session takes place in the second episode of the first season, while Don enjoys himself with another woman.[17] At

the beginning of the sequence, we see the head of therapist Dr. Arnold Wayne (Andy Umberger) on the left side of the screen, sitting in a suit on a stool next to a couch upon which Betty lies, elegantly dressed and turned away from the doctor. While Betty speaks, Dr. Wayne observes from behind and takes notes.



Fig. 4: *Mad Men*, Season 01/Episode 02, 0:38:32.

The camera pans extremely slowly to the right, taking the psychiatrist out of the picture and filling the screen with the young woman, who speaks to herself and moves nothing but her hands. The camera then gently shifts direction and moves toward the patient's upper body. We see how Betty removes her watch from her arm, which Don had given to her as a present (the armband is made of platinum). Betty begins her monologue under the watching eyes of the resolutely silent therapist by saying that she does not know why she is here. Indeed, she is nervous and afraid, she has difficulty sleeping, and her hands sometimes feel numb. Like a broken automobile, she just isn't working right anymore. "Not that you are a mechanic," she adds, in a first attempt to get a reaction out of Dr. Wayne. She then presumes that many people come to him because of the atom bomb. "Is that true?" she says, directly addressing him while looking off to the side. Dr. Wayne does not react. Betty continues by saying that she learned from her mother, who died young, that it is not polite to speak about oneself. In the meantime, she lays her watch on the table next to the couch, behind which the psychiatrist sits in silence. She asks if she can smoke, turning her head to look directly at him. The camera cuts away and we see the psychiatrist at the bottom of the screen, expressionless and silent, sliding an ashtray in her direction and turning back to his notebook.



Fig. 5: *Mad Men*, Season 01/Episode 02; 0:40:01.

The camera cuts away once again and we see Betty pull out a cigarette. The next and last shot in the sequence is a close-up of Betty smoking. (There is excessive smoking throughout the series.)



Fig. 6: *Mad Men*, Season 01/Episode 02, 0:40:21.

"We're all so lucky to be here," she says in a trembling voice. Cut. Don Draper in bed with another woman.

This is an entirely different kind of talking cure from the one offered by Dr. Melfi, and it is staged in an entirely different manner. Karl Kraus' statement about psychoanalysis seems to be entirely applicable. It is the sickness for which therapy claims to be the therapy. The woman is literally pinned to her subordinate position. She is given an outlet so that she remains calm. The male domination in the therapeutic setting is cemented by the chumminess between the psychiatrist and Betty's husband. When Don secretly calls the therapist that evening, after the couple arrives together at home, he receives from the therapist a succinct diagnosis after just one sitting: "She's a very anxious young woman. You're doing the right thing."

6.3. In Treatment

In the series *In Treatment*, therapeutic sessions are not merely a brief intermezzo such as in *Mad Men*, nor are they merely a primary element of the plot as in *The Sopranos*. They *are* the actual plot. All the dramas that take place in the series take place in therapy, and the course these dramas take, despite their

fictional character, is staged much more authentically than in the other two shows. The narrative rhythm results from the repeated sessions with Dr. Paul Weston's (Gabriel Byrne) various patients. The scenery is thus largely restricted to the rooms in which the therapist receives his patients, initially in Dr. Weston's house in Brooklyn, where he lives with his family, and, in the second season, in the apartment into which he moves after his divorce. His everyday world is where he is visited by patients of different ages and sex and with different illnesses. Unlike *The Sopranos* or *Mad Men*, the viewers are not presented with characters whose lives outside of these therapeutic sessions are familiar to the viewers from the fictitious world of the show. We can only gather what brings the patients into the therapist's office from their conversations with Dr. Weston. With the exception of the sessions that Dr. Weston holds under the eyes of his supervisor (and later therapist), the lives of the patients outside of therapy remain entirely unknown; they are left up to the imagination of the audience.

At the beginning of the third episode of the first season, Dr. Weston is busy at home when there is a knock on the window of the door to his office.^[18] The therapist walks to his office and opens the jammed door. Standing before him is a sixteen-year-old girl (Mia Wasikowska), whose two arms are in casts down to her fingertips. Dr. Paul Weston introduces himself with his first name and reaches out his right hand. The visitor extends her right hand and touches his hand with her fingertips. She introduces herself as "Sophie." As she says her name, the camera shows a close-up of how their fingers cautiously touch. The therapist and his patient enter a large room decorated with many books and other accessories, as if it were a private living room. Sophie sits down on a comfortable sofa across from Dr. Weston, who sits in a chair. Next to the chair is a small table with a notebook. Between the doctor and the patient is a narrow and low table upon which we see a carafe filled with water, two glasses and a box of tissues. On the right side of the sofa there is another small table with a clock that only the therapist can see. At the end of the pan that captures the scenery of the therapist's office, we see Dr. Weston in a half-profile and Sophie sitting across from him, whose arms in casts are now much more clearly visible. Light shines into the room from a large window in the background looking out onto the garden, and beneath the window is a desk with a monitor.



Fig. 7: *In Treatment*, Season 01/Episode 03, 0:02:06.

Sophie immediately begins to speak, and tells the somewhat complicated story of why she has come to see Dr. Weston, which moves him to ask several questions. This first dialogue, like nearly the entire 25 minutes of the first episode, is filmed using a back-and-forth technique, initially over the shoulder of the respective speaker, and later in increasingly direct and close-up images of the person speaking or listening. Sophie is clearly tense and attempts to hide her uncertainty by adopting a very forthcoming attitude. The therapist treats her in a friendly and supportive fashion, obviously trying to show her that he takes her seriously.



Fig. 8: *In Treatment*, Season 01/Episode 03, 0:02:19.

The initial issue concerns the questions of who recommended Sophie to come to Dr. Weston and why she needs a psychiatric analysis. (We later find out that she is suspected, entirely unjustifiably in her view, of having caused an accident with suicidal motives). "So, that's why I'm here," Sophie sums up her introductory explanations. Dr. Weston reacts with an equally skeptical and contemplative facial expression and gives a sign that he understands. The camera cuts to Sophie's face and she remarks insistently, "I'm here for your professional opinion, not for... ." She stops speaking.



Fig. 9: *In Treatment*, Season 01/Episode 03, 0:02:47.

After a brief pause, we hear the voice of the therapist: "Not for... ." The camera turns to Dr. Weston, who looks skeptical, hesitates, and once again begins to speak with raised eyebrows and an understanding smile: "...not for therapy."



Fig. 10: *In Treatment*, Season 01/Episode 03, 0:02:35.

Patients who insist or attempt to convince themselves at the beginning of their therapy that they do not need therapy exemplify an often repeated topos in *In Treatment*, which also plays a significant role in the other sequences I have mentioned. In each case, the viewer is faced with the question of whether, when, and how the sound-barrier represented by the admission that they do not need therapy will finally be broken. The same is true of Dr. Weston's sessions with Sophie. This reflective component in the self-presentation of the patients also initiates reflection on the part of the viewers, who consider whether, and how, the therapeutic process will begin in the dramaturgy of the show. In the case of *In Treatment*, however, there is an additional issue. Just as at the end of the sequence just described, we often see the therapist remain silent or hesitate in his attempt to give an adequate response to his patients. On the one hand, this creates obvious tension within the conversation. On the other hand, it gives the viewers time to form an expectation, and to imagine or consider what an appropriate reaction would be to what has just been heard and seen. The brief pauses within the dialogue give them a special occasion to take part in the fictitious plot imaginatively and with reflection.

7. Intensified participation

Such a law of form [*Formgesetz*], which enables intensified emotional and intellectual participation, is, in my view, the primary characteristic of quality TV insofar it is capable of fulfilling its artistic claim. Although I have recalled only tiny excerpts of these three shows, they nevertheless reveal essential features of the composition typical of these and other innovative shows. Each of the commented scenes displays in a calm, yet elaborated gesture both simple and complex social situations. These situations animate the audience to reflect on the role, attitude, and emotions of the characters involved, and also on the way the characters change and are changed over the course of the show. These scenes present fragments of psychotherapeutic sessions that also play with the clichés of such scenes typical in film, where doctors and patients and the possibility and impossibility of therapy are considered; and where partially comical and crude forms of behavior whose humor and meaning are either not understandable or are so only after having viewed all the episodes; characters who change and develop; social situations that are not entirely transparent, neither to the actors nor to the viewers; and situations in which

the basic constellations and conflicts of human life and sociality are presented and varied.

Viewing scenes such as these or, more generally, shows like those from which these scenes are taken, means letting oneself be moved by the form of their presentation to reflect on the topics treated in these scenes. It means recognizing how they play and ironically break with clichés and transform interpersonal constellations. It means activating and, perhaps, even expanding one's own knowledge and experience when it comes to interpreting scenes. It means being attentive to their historical, social, and intertextual context and to the manner in which they are presented. And it means taking pleasure in the exercise of these capacities guided by the dramaturgy of the show. In brief, only those who are willing to let themselves be determined by the dramaturgic guidelines of a show will be able to gain their own view of the events onscreen and, thus, feel entertained by these events and their presentation.

This is how these shows create their audience. A *shared* audience emerges through the shared interest in "thinking observation," in Hegel's terms, of general human and social relations as they refer to complexly conceived characters, through collective participation in the specific artificial presentation of the respective show. This commonality, however, is reconcilable with the fact that each viewer or each group of viewers arrives at an individual interpretation of the perspectives presented to them. Through their form, quality TV series enable us to encounter exemplary human situations in an entertaining and reflective manner, allowing the viewers in turn to play out and think through their own individual understanding of themselves and the world.

8. Summary

The audience for quality TV is a critical audience precisely because it is subjected to the formal dictate of these shows with "active passivity," Adorno's term for the reception of works of art. This audience allows itself to be fascinated by the procedures of progression through interruption, variation, and digression employed by quality TV. It lets itself be taken in by the dissonant perspectives that these shows offer on the constellation of their characters, and also from the changing rhythms in which their deeds and their suffering are presented. This open, incalculable, and complex composition is the reason for the intellectual pleasure offered by quality TV. Active participation in them is derived from the fixed prefiguration by them. "Not being able to want" in the face of their dynamic unfolding is the necessary condition for the freedoms they grant to their viewers. Therein lies the artistic demand with which quality TV so resolutely ignores the traditional borders between art and entertainment.

However, the difference between "new" and "old" TV shows should not be exaggerated. Even some of the more traditional shows offer complex possibilities for response that can in no way be reduced to the options of "identifying thinking" or being manipulatively seduced. Aside from the fact that many of these "new" productions are not very innovative and that some older TV shows came close to the complexity of the new ones, the sheer opposition between new and old TV is quite misleading. Umberto Eco long ago distinguished between a "naïve" and a "clever" interpretation of entertainment in television and elsewhere whereby the former largely follows the events of the

episodes and the latter primarily focuses on the varieties of narration.^[19] According to Eco, what is constitutive for the aesthetics of this kind of shows is that they allow both of these stances at the same time, and thus a constant shifting between them. This observation, which is true for the television of both yesterday and today, allows us to grasp the special position occupied by the best of quality TV. The best shows do not allow their viewers to choose between being entertained by twists in the plot or by the sophistication of their overall composition. They do not merely allow the audience to reflect and imagine along with the show, they exclude any other alternative. Only those who have eyes and ears for the play of their forms can take pleasure in their respective cosmos and understand the course of events they present.

It should not be forgotten, however, that in no way do all new TV shows represent quality TV.^[20] Whether their style and their setting be old or new, as television broadcasts they all coexist with television's other, highly divergent formats. Quality TV, therefore, has not given rise to a new kind of television but only to a further facet of its evolution, which has always sought to adapt all kinds of audiovisual presence and presentation, without one or the other form ever being representative for television as such. Both the contents and the form of television represent nothing determinate, which is the very reason why it has room for the shabby, the horrid, and the beautiful, as well as for anything else that, for better or worse, moves the society whose product it is.

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Endnotes

[1] See, Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (eds.), *It's Not TV. Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (New York: Routledge and Thompson, 2008); Robert Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (New York: Continuum, 1996).

[2] Cf. Jason Mittel, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (2006), 29–40.

[3] Cf. Sarah Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good? Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgement," in John McCabe and Kim Akass (eds.), *Quality TV. Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 19–34.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 26. See also Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film*

and *Television* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003) and Arno Meteling, Isabell Otto, and Gabriele Schabacher (eds.), "Previously on." *Zur Ästhetik der Zeitlichkeit neuerer TV-Serien* (München: Fink, 2010).

[5] Unlike film noir, the more shady roles are largely reserved for the male protagonists, with the exception of Olivia Jones in *Scandal* and Claire Underwood in *House of Cards*.

[6] Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Kann das Publikum wollen?," in *Gesammelte Schriften* Volume 20.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 342–347.

[7] Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Prolog zum Fernsehen" and "Fernsehen als Ideologie," in *Eingriffe. Neun kritische Modelle* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), pp. 60–80 and 81–98.

[8] Theodor W. Adorno, "Kann das Publikum wollen?," p. 343.

[9] Cf. Angela Keppler/Martin Seel, "Zwischen Vereinnahmung und Distanzierung. Vier Fallstudien zur Massenkultur," *Merkur* 45.7/8 (1991), 877–889 and Angela Keppler and Martin Seel, "Adornos reformistische Kulturkritik," in Georg Kohler and Stefan Müller-Doohm (eds.) *Wozu Adorno?* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2008), 223–234.

[10] Theodor W. Adorno, "Kann das Publikum wollen?," p. 345.

[11] Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), p. 190. On the concept of "active passivity," see a more detailed account in Martin Seel, "Active Passivity: On the Aesthetic Variant of Freedom," *Estetika. The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* New Series VIII/2 (2014), 269–281.

[12] Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, p. 202.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 193.

[14] Theodor W. Adorno, "Kann das Publikum wollen?," p. 345.

[15] It has often been noted that therapeutic conversations play a prominent role in many current TV shows. Cf. Maren Scheurer, "Erzähler in Analyse, Therapie in Serie: Zur Produktiven Verbindung von Fernsehserie und Psychotherapie," in Jonas Nesselhauf/Markus Schleich (eds.), *Quality-Television. Die narrative Spielwiese des 21. Jahrhunderts?!* (Berlin: Lit-Verlag, 2014), pp. 159–209 and Rainer Winter, "All Happy Families: THE SOPRANOS und die Kultur des Fernsehens im 21. Jahrhundert," in Robert Blanchet et al. (eds.): *Serielle Formen. Von den frühen Film-Seriels zu aktuellen Quality-TV- und Online-Serien* (Marburg: Schüren, 2011), pp. 153–174.

[16] *The Sopranos* (USA 1999), Season 01/Episode 01: "The Sopranos"; Director: David Chase; 00:50:34-0:53:21.

[17] *Mad Men* (USA 2007), Season 01/Episode 02: "Ladies Room"; Director: Alan Taylor; 00:38:32-0:40:24.

[18] *In Treatment* (USA 2008), Season 01/Episode 03: "Sophie: Week One;" Director: Rodrigo Garcia; 00:01:35-0:02:57. The first two seasons of this show are largely based on its predecessor *BeTipul* (Israel 2005–2008).

[19] Umberto Eco, "Serialität im Universum der Kunst und der Massenmedien," in *Streit der Interpretationen* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag, 1987), pp. 49-65, esp. 57f.; cf. Umberto Eco, "Die Innovation im Seriellen," in *Über Spiegel und andere Phänomene* (München: dtv, 1985), pp. 155-180.

[20] A current example is *Lillyhammer* (NRK/Netflix, since 2012). Steven Van Zandt, who played a key role in *The Sopranos*, plays a Mafioso who ends up in Norway and seeks, against all odds, to maintain his old lifestyle. And he manages to succeed in nearly every episode, with all kinds of politically incorrect comical effects. This, however, means an absence of the long narrative arcs and the ambivalence that characterize quality TV.
